

A Web of Ways: Navigating Student Persistence & Retention

A Web of Ways: Navigating the Myriad of Perspectives on  
Student Persistence and Institutional Retention in Postsecondary  
Education

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### **Abstract**

Access to education is an important issue for both governments and postsecondary institutions, especially with the shift to a knowledge-based economy in Canada and around the world. Access is only part of the process to developing a knowledge-based workforce; once a student starts his or her postsecondary journey, the focus shifts from issues around access to student persistence. To achieve high levels of student persistence and adequately measure retention rates, retention issues should be approached from both the student and the institution perspective. This paper explores the difference between student persistence and institutional retention and critically analyzes key factors that can impact persistence and retention. It also introduces and analyzes key theoretical perspectives and related retention strategies. The findings of this paper highlight that student retention strategies require a clear understanding of student characteristics as well as strong leadership, and clear communication. Institutions cannot focus on one aspect of student retention as there are many factors that impact a student's decision to persist or withdraw.

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## **A Web of Ways: Navigating the Myriad of Perspectives on Student Persistence and Institutional Retention in Postsecondary Education**

### **Introduction**

A spider weaves an intricate pattern across a wall that serves a specific purpose; to capture other insects. Some simply stick to the glistening surface of the web, while others become entangled at various points in the weave depending on their personal traits, characteristics, and circumstances. Although this may seem like an odd analogy to introduce the topic of student retention, there are many parallels that can be drawn. Postsecondary institutions seek to attract students from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., socio-economic, academic, cultural, etc.). Students are enticed by academic excellence, financial packages, life experiences, and the opportunity to expand their career options, through a variety of institutional recruitment and communication channels. Unlike insects trapped in a spider's web, students pursuing a postsecondary education have the opportunity to voluntarily leave a particular institution, or the entire postsecondary system at any time.

A student's decision to discontinue his or her postsecondary education is referred to as student departure. A student's decision to continue with his or her postsecondary education from one year to the next is referred to as student persistence. From an institutional perspective, the ability to keep students from one year to the next is student retention. Although these terms may appear to be synonymous with one another, they are quite distinct and should be approached in different ways. For example, a student may persist from first year to second year due to his or her personal desire to achieve a particular academic goal. An institution, on the other hand, may utilize a highly selective admission assessment process to select students who are most likely to be retained.

To ensure postsecondary institutions maximize their ability to retain students and adequately measure retention rates, student retention should be approached from both the student perspective as well as the institutional perspective. From a student perspective, this involves exploring the reason(s) some students voluntarily drop out and others persist. From an institutional perspective, this involves learning about the student population and understanding which students are most likely to be retained, and why, and which students are most at risk of not completing their studies. This information can assist postsecondary institutions with determining retention strategies that can enhance student satisfaction, ensure academic success, and improve degree completion rates. Considering the importance of student retention issues to postsecondary institutions, this paper will explore the relationship between student persistence and institutional retention. It will examine the reasons behind why some students drop out and persist and look at how institutions can improve retention. The paper will also explore an institution's ability to predict student persistence or determine if an institution should focus more on preventative strategies. Lastly, the paper will explore the importance of leadership and internal communication when implementing a student retention strategy.

There are a number of reasons for addressing student retention in postsecondary education. From an institutional point of view, one of the key factors supporting retention initiatives relates to enrolment management. Enrolment management involves the tracking of student enrolment behaviour during each year of study to assist with forecasting enrolment patterns and budgets, tracking attrition, and gaining a better understanding of the characteristics of the student body.

Forecasting an institution's budget is an important consideration with respect to student retention as there are significant financial benefits to an institution when students are retained.

Students who decide to leave prior to graduation result in a loss of revenues from tuition, residence, meal plans, the bookstore, restaurants, and other campus service outlets (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Schuh, 2005). Institutional finances also tie into government relations and accountability. In Canada, most postsecondary institutions are publicly funded; therefore, many are required to provide accountability reports to their provincial government (Ontario, 2005, 2007).

Institutional reputation and alumni relations are also affected by poor student retention rates (Schuh, 2005; Swail, 2004). Low retention rates result in fewer graduates, which can have a negative impact on the academic reputation of an institution and can decrease the number of potential future donors (Schuh, 2005). Considering the impact student retention can have on graduation rates and the importance of accountability, reputation, fundraising, and finances for postsecondary institutions, a careful analysis of these factors should be explored to gain a clear understanding of the impacts for a specific institution.

There are many student-centred factors that can impact a student's enrolment decision such as personal experiences, life situations, grades, the campus environment, finances, employment, and educational commitment to name a few (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Brauer, 1996; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001; Schuh, 2005; Swail, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997). Many of these factors relate to the student's perspective on persistence. Students who do not persist with their postsecondary studies lose time and money (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Hagedorn, 2005; Schuh, 2005). They cannot regain time spent in class that could have been spent working or pursuing other interests. Students, in most cases, cannot regain tuition fees paid which can increase their level of debt. Since the benefit of a higher income applies to graduates of postsecondary

education, students who do not complete their postsecondary studies typically have a reduced earning potential, a lower socio-economic status, and contribute less to the economic development of a country (Hagedorn, 2005). The student perspective is of significant value to institutions and is a key factor behind many of the theoretical perspectives of student retention (Moxley et al., 2001).

### **Student Retention Basis: Understanding the Language**

The use of language in the field of student retention should not be taken lightly. There are different meanings, perspectives, and outcomes depending on the way a situation, issue, or strategy is examined. Referring back to the spider web analogy, the language used in the field of student retention can be compared to the different threads in the web that make up the intricate pattern; each with its own purpose and role in defining the overall structure. The use of language in any field of study is crucial for conveying information and is one of the greatest challenges with the available retention research. Many researchers have not taken the time to clearly define what is being studied: persistence, drop-out, retention or attrition. There are only a few studies (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Hagedorn, 2005; Tinto, 1993) that clearly address and define the terminology.

The terms student persistence and student retention, which are frequently used interchangeably, have two very different foci. Persistence refers to a student's ability or motivation to achieve his or her own academic goals (Astin, 1975; Hagedorn, 2005). Retention refers to the institution's ability to keep students from one year to the next (Astin, 1975; Hagedorn, 2005). Persistence is a measure that focuses on the student, whereas retention is a measure that focuses on the institution. This is an important distinction to make as the goals and motivations for a student can be very different from those of an institution. For example, a

student may enter a university to take a couple of writing courses to improve his or her writing skills. The student completes a year and does not enroll the following year as he or she has accomplished what he or she intended to do. From the student's perspective, the goal has been achieved. However, from an institution's perspective, it may appear that the student has voluntarily withdrawn.

Voluntary drop-out and involuntary drop-out also have quite different meanings in the realm of student retention (Hutto, 2002). A student who is required to withdraw due to poor academic performance is categorized as involuntary withdrawal (or involuntary drop-out). If a student decides to withdraw for non-academic reasons, such as personal, financial, or family reasons, it is categorized as voluntary withdrawal (or voluntary drop-out) (Hutto, 2002).

It is also important to make a distinction between institutional retention and system retention (Hutto, 2002). Institutional retention refers to an institution's ability to retain a student within a particular college or university, whereas system retention is the ability to retain students within postsecondary education, regardless of the institution they attend. The distinction between institutional and system retention adds another layer to the retention web referred to as stop-outs; a student who voluntarily withdraws for a period of time, then return at a later date to continue his or her studies (Tinto, 1993).

The various terms involved in student retention can create complications for researchers as unclear definitions can change the meaning behind a study for the reader. It can also create confusion with the conclusions of the study. For the purpose of this paper, the term drop-out will refer to students who voluntarily withdraw from an institution.

### **Key Theoretical Perspectives of Student Retention**

There are several theoretical perspectives that can be used to understand student retention and assist institutions with developing an appropriate supporting strategy. Student retention theories relate back to studies conducted in the 1930s on student mortality that considered completion time, reasons for departure, attrition, and institutional size (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Retention theories have since evolved to include models from a number of different perspectives such as economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological perspectives (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

Early theoretical perspectives on student departure focused on the psychological aspects of student departure. These include the psychological model of college student retention (Bean & Eaton as cited in Braxton & Hirschy, 2005) and the student involvement theory (Astin, 1975; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Astin's student involvement theory (1975), one of the more noted theories, stated that increased student involvement has a positive effect on a student's decision to persist.

Spady (1970) developed a model that looked at the relationship between student attrition and Durkheim's suicide theory. This was the first model that took a more sociological perspective on student retention (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Hutto, 2002). Spady's research provided the foundation for the work of Vincent Tinto who developed the most cited retention theory in use today, the student integration model (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Cabrera, Nora, Castaneda, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Hutto, 2003; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Moxley et al., 2001; Seidman, 2005).

Tinto's (1975) student integration model is an institution-focused model that explores the integration of academic and social systems within a postsecondary institution. Based on Van Gennep's rite of passage theory (Hutto, 2002, Tinto, 1998), Tinto found that student retention

can be improved by increasing a student's level of commitment to the institution. This commitment is developed by engaging students and ensuring they properly integrate into the academic and social environments of the institution. Tinto's model differed from Spady's in that he expanded his research to include a more comprehensive list of characteristics and identified different categories of students who withdraw: voluntary, involuntary, transfer students (students who transfer to another institution) and system withdrawals (Hutto, 2002).

Organizational models look at organizational structures and the variables within an institution that can influence a student's decision to stay or to leave their studies. Bean's student attrition model is the most notable example of the organizational perspective (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Grayson & Grayson, 2003). Bean (1980) explored the relationship between employee turnover in human resource management and student attrition in postsecondary education (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). He found several similarities between student retention and employee turnover. Bean (1980) also added two new variables that impact student attrition: gender and external factors, such as family circumstances and socio-economic status.

More recent theories combine both sociological and organizational perspectives. Cabrera et al. (1992) compared Tinto's student integration model and Bean's student attrition model to check for validity and similarities in the models' ability to predict student retention. Although each proved valid and had their strengths, they found that the two theories were complimentary. This initial research resulted in the integrated model of student retention developed by Cabrera et al. (1993). Cabrera et al. (1993) concluded that a better understanding of student persistence could be achieved through an integrated model as it provides "a more comprehensive

understanding of the individual, environmental and institutional factors on persistence” (Cabrera et al., 1993, p. 135).

The last group of theoretical perspectives focuses on the economic aspects of student retention. This includes theories such as the human capital theory (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Economic models focus on the cost versus benefit of attending postsecondary education. If the cost of pursuing postsecondary studies exceeds the perceived financial benefit of obtaining postsecondary credentials, students are more likely to drop out (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Gray & Herr, 1988).

When trying to decide which perspective is most suitable for an institution to implement, it is important to understand the limitations of the various models and an institution’s individual characteristics. Tinto’s model tends to be the preferred model due to its accuracy from various tests of validity (Braxton & Lee, 2005; Cabrera et al., 1992; Grayson & Grayson, 2003); however, there are limitations to his theory (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Tinto, 1982). For example, Tinto’s initial model did not include factors external to the postsecondary environment, nor did it make distinctions between female and male students (Bean, 1980; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Tinto, 1982). It is important to avoid generalizations and assume one retention model can provide all the answers (Bean, 2005; Tinto, 1982).

An area that is drawing attention is institution type. There are clear differences between factors that impact retention at commuter institutions versus residential institutions (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). For example, Braxton and Hirschy (2005) stated that residential institutions should focus more on social integration and institutional commitment/loyalty, whereas commuter institutions should focus more on entry characteristics and academic integration.

### ***Future Developments in Student Retention Theory***

As the knowledge base of a subject area increases, there is a natural tendency to modify and adjust theoretical perspectives or develop new ones. The challenge with the development of new perspectives is the assumption that they have undergone the same scrutiny and tests for validity as the original models (Berger & Lyon, 2005). For instance, it was through tests for validity that factors such as financial resources, connections with external communities, and differences between institutional types (residential versus commuter institutions) were identified (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

Keeping this in mind, a few new perspectives have been introduced. Two of the most notable models include Seidman's (2005) formula for student retention and Swail's (2004) geometric model of student persistence. What is interesting about these two models is that the debate between a student approach and an institutional approach is still prevalent. Seidman's (2005) model focuses on early identification of at-risk students and the application of intervention strategies for these students, whereas Swail's (2004) model focuses on institutional factors that have the most significant impact on student retention.

Based on the research available to date, these models do not appear to have undergone tests for validity nor have they gained support through a peer review process. Another challenge with these models is the lack of information on the limitations of the model. Seidman's (2005) model does not address how intervention strategies would be implemented; would they be mandatory for students or voluntary? If the strategies are voluntary, how are the benefits of the strategies communicated to the students such that students would want to participate? Considering the lack of tests for validity and information on limitations, institutions should exercise caution if considering the use of these models. What may be most appropriate for institutions seeking to improve student retention is to use the fundamental principles of these

models to develop an approach that best addresses the institution's characteristics, from both a student and an institutional perspective.

### **Factors Impacting a Student's Decision to Leave**

Understanding the various theoretical perspectives is an important first step in gaining an understanding of the field of student retention. What is more fundamental for institutions to understand is why students drop out of postsecondary education. A significant amount of attention has been placed on researching and understanding the factors that impact a student's decision to leave his or her postsecondary studies, whether for a short period of time (stop out) or permanently (drop out) (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980, 2005; Brauer, 1996; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Lambert, Zeman, Allen, & Bussiere, 2004; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Schuh, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997).

The decision to leave postsecondary education is not a quick and streamlined process; there are a variety of factors involved. Factors that can impact a student's decision to leave include: institutional fit; commitment; student psychological characteristics; academics (e.g., grades, course interactions, advising); social interactions (e.g., campus involvement); institutional bureaucratic factors; external factors (e.g., job opportunities); student's background (e.g., pre-university grades, parents' income, and parent's education); employment; and finances (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980, 2005; Brauer, 1996; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Schuh, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997).

It should also be noted that the reasons students drop out vary depending on the type of academic program and the stage or year level a student is entering (Tinto, 1993, 1998). For example, factors that influence a first-year student to leave before the start of second year are different from the factors that influence a student who is deciding to return for a third year.

Therefore, it is important to target retention strategies at a particular stage of a student's lifecycle as opposed to taking a generalized approach (Bean, 2005; Tinto, 1982). It is also important for researchers to be specific about whom they are studying and the context of their research. This is to ensure that other institutions reviewing study results have a clear understanding of the purpose and goal of the study before determining if the results would have a similar impact at their institution. Alternatively, in the case of other researchers, it is important for those who are looking to duplicate the study to be able to do so accurately.

Most of the factors indicated above focus on the student or on individual factors. Although individual factors are significant in a student's decision to persist or withdraw from postsecondary education, they are not the only factors involved in the process. A student's decision to persist or drop out from the postsecondary environment could be due to institutional factors, individual factors, or a combination of the two (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Tinto, 1975). The literature clearly indicates that there is no single dominant factor that impacts student retention (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980, 2005; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Cabrera et al, 1993; Day, 2001; Lambert et al., 2004; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Murtagh, Burns, & Schuter, 1999; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1988). The challenge for many institutions is to determine the factors that influence *their* students. Once these factors have been determined, the institution can embark on the process to develop and implement programs to improve student retention. To assist institutions with the process of identifying these factors, Bean (2005) identified nine questions institutions can ask themselves when starting to investigate student retention issues. These questions include topics such as program offerings, financial support, support-services, and staff knowledge.

The underlying theme to understanding factors that impact persistence or retention is research. Implementing a retention strategy is not just about offering programs to cohorts of students; it is important to understand the student body, who leaves and why, and know what programs are available to reduce attrition. Institutions that invest in this initial research are more likely to achieve success with their retention program. Research to date has identified a number of institutional and individual factors that impact student retention rates (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Brauer, 1996; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Tinto, 1975, 1997). Institutional factors include support services, the availability of financial aid, institutional fit, the availability of extra-curricular activities, academic advising, accessible faculty members, campus size, facilities, and the social climate of the institution (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Tinto, 1975). Individual factors include academic ability, problem solving and decision-making abilities, the ability to interact effectively with other members of the institution's community, a student's family background (e.g., parental education and income level), and a student's commitment to the institution and him/herself (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Brauer, 1996; Tinto, 1975).

The ability to discuss these factors in great detail exceeds the scope of this paper; therefore, this discussion will focus on the two key institutional factors that have been identified as having the greatest impact on student retention: admissions and recruitment and finances (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Rice & Darke, 2000; Schuh, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 1975).

### **Impact of Admissions and Recruitment Policies on Retention**

Several researchers have examined admissions and recruitment policies and procedures and their impact on student retention (Bean, 1980; Bowers, 2002; Day, 2001; Lambert et al.,

2004; Rice & Darke, 2000; Tinto, 1993, 1975). Most studies focused on identifying entry characteristics that can assist with determining which students are most likely to persist to degree completion. From a student perspective, recruitment strategies and communication tools play a pivotal role in establishing a student's image of an institution and his or her expectations with respect to the social and academic aspects of an institution (Tinto, 1993). To ensure students have an appropriate understanding of an institution's programs, environment, and values, communication vehicles, such as print materials and Web sites, need to appropriately represent an institution.

From an institution's perspective the focus shifts from recruitment to admission policies and procedures such as admission requirements and selection processes. Some of the most common admission requirements include high school admission averages, standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and personal statements from the student. Research supports the relationship between admission averages and student persistence, where higher admission averages result in higher levels of student persistence (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Day, 2001; Lambert at al., 2004; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Rice & Darke, 2000). There is some research that supports the identification of leadership qualities in the selection process, where students with demonstrated leadership skills are more likely to be retained (Rice & Darke, 2000). The role of standardized testing in determining student persistence remains inconclusive (Rice & Darke, 2000).

The challenge with the relationship between admissions policies and student persistence relates back to the notion of enrolment management and the level of supply and demand for a particular institution; the greater the demand, the greater the institution's ability to have more selective admission processes. Tinto (1975) noted that more highly selective institutions, such as

private institutions in the United States, typically have selective admission processes that result in lower attrition rates for an institution. The challenge is that not all institutions can be highly selective and meet their enrolment goals at the same time. Another challenge is the definition of a high admission average. One institution may define a specific admission average level as strong, whereas another institution could think otherwise.

Considering the available research, admissions policies and procedures, more than student recruitment, can have an impact on student retention; however, the level of impact can vary between institutions. Institutions need to ask themselves three fundamental questions when considering persistence from an admissions perspective. First, does the institution want to be considered highly selective or have more open admission policies? Second, does the institution want to focus on admitting students that have the greatest potential to succeed or on encouraging students to reach their greatest potential, meaning, taking a more student-centred approach? Finally, is the institution willing to support students once they are enrolled to ensure they reach their potential? This final question is especially important for institutions with open admission policies to consider. Meeting enrolment targets, at the point of admission, is one issue; giving students the tools to succeed is a completely separate issue that requires appropriate intervention strategies.

### **Impact of Finances on Retention**

Postsecondary finances spin a web of their own with respect to student retention. Funding sources, aid eligibility, and socio-economic background all play a role in the funding matrix in which students become entangled when financing their postsecondary education. One of the greatest challenges with respect to postsecondary funding is student awareness of the various funding opportunities available for their particular situation.

A review of the current literature produces a number of contradictory findings on the impact of finances on student retention (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; McElroy, 2005; Rice & Darke, 2000; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Schuh, 2005; Tinto, 1982). The challenge with studies targeting postsecondary financing is their multiple foci and the number of elements involved in postsecondary financing. This makes it challenging for researchers when reviewing the literature. For example, Grayson and Grayson (2003) looked at the relationship between persistence and unmet need and found that students often cite finances as a reason for withdrawal. Studies conducted by the Millennium Foundation (2007, 2008) looked at the impact of debt level and the composition of student debt in Canada and found that unmet need matters more than debt level; however, the conclusions focused on further education (i.e., graduate school) as opposed to persistence and retention issues with a student's current program of study. One of the limitations found in both studies from the Millennium Foundation is the assumption that a student dropped out if they did not apply for financial aid in future years, which is not necessarily an accurate assumption.

McElroy (2005) conducted one of the most elaborate studies in Canada on the relationship between student aid and finances. The study provided a framework to understand how students finance their education in Canada. However, there are a number of limitations to the study that have a significant impact on the results. For example, the study was limited to a five-year period; therefore, students who took longer than five years to complete their studies were not accurately portrayed in the results. Also a number of variables, such as institution type and a student's entering grade point average, were not considered which could have impacted the findings. Lastly, the results appear to be contradictory as the findings indicate that drop-outs

received more grant aid than students who persisted (McElroy, 2005, p. 29) and students who persisted were more likely to receive grant aid without loans (p. 25).

Tinto (1982) raises an interesting point in his findings by making the connection between the student experience and financial tolerance levels. Financial tolerance level refers to the amount of debt a student is willing to carry based on the level of importance a student places on his or her education. If a student views educational goals as worthwhile and meaningful, he or she will be more likely to carry the financial burdens associated with these goals. If a student feels the costs outweigh the benefits, he or she will be more likely to discontinue his or her studies due to finances (Tinto, 1982, p. 690). This connection to the human capital theory and the student integration model is an important observation to note as it relates back to the notion that student retention issues are interwoven, like a web, and cannot be viewed in isolation of each other. The decision to withdraw is a process in which finances enter the equation at some point in the decision timeline. What is not clear is the turning point when finances become significant in the decision-making process; therefore, the relationship between finances and student retention remains unclear. There is a relationship; however, it cannot be looked upon as an independent variable. It must be considered as part of the matrix of variables that affect a student's decision-making process.

### **Retention Strategies and the Emergence of Learning Communities**

A discussion on student retention would not be complete without a review of the various retention strategies. The type of retention programming adopted by an institution depends on the targeted audience (e.g., first year to second year or upper year students), leadership, the goals of an institution, and the investment an institution is willing to make. Some of the most common retention strategies, especially for first-year students, include orientation (Brawer, 1996; Grayson

& Grayson, 2003; Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2004; Tinto, 1993), study skills programs, and University101 or First Year Experience programs (Day, 2001; Dunphy, Miller, Woodruff & Nelson, 1987; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Tinto, 1993).

Institutions looking to take a more personal approach to their retention strategies can look at programs such as academic tutoring, peer mentoring, and academic advising (Brawer, 1996; Day, 2001; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Tinto, 1993). The challenge with taking a more personal approach is compliance, especially at non-residential institutions (Day, 2001; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Day (2001) stated that non-mandatory retention programs have low participation rates that can negatively impact the overall objectives of a program. Institutions may find that a proactive approach, where students are automatically enrolled in a program and assigned an advisor, may have greater success as opposed to a program where students seek out the service. Depending on the composition of the institution, it may be worthwhile to develop programs targeted at specific cohorts such as identified at-risk students (Day, 2001; Habley & McClanahan, 2004).

The challenge of program compliance, especially at non-residential institutions, and the desire to converge social and academic communities within an institution has resulted in the development of a new retention strategy called learning communities. Learning communities group students together in clusters or pairs to complete defined activities. The goal of a learning community is to enable students to integrate academically and socially with peers who have similar academic interests (Tinto, 1997). Four types of learning communities have been identified: curricular, classroom, residential, and student-focused (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Academic-based learning communities (curricular and classroom) can be applied to a particular course, a grouping of courses or faculty members, or can connect into residence-focused learning

communities (Price, 2005). Regardless of how and why learning communities are established, they are gaining more recognition in the United States as a viable retention strategy for many institution types because they organize students and faculty into smaller groups, encourage curriculum integration, help students establish support networks, provide social settings for students, focus faculty and students on learning outcomes, and provide a structured setting for the delivery of academic support programs (Gordon, Young & Kalkanov, 2001; Price, 2005, Tinto, 1997). Interestingly, the concept of learning communities does not appear to have gained as much popularity in Canada. What may be a more appropriate assumption is that Canadian institutions utilizing learning communities are not publicizing their initiatives or sharing their strategies and programs as readily as institutions in the United States. Canadian-based research on student retention is lagging when compared to the United States. One can postulate that Canadian institutions do not deem of significant value the sharing of institutional findings as compared to institutions in the United States.

### **The Importance of Leadership and Communications in Student Retention Strategies**

One of the challenges faced by many institutions when implementing an institution-wide retention strategy is the lack of communication and leadership. The research on student retention makes several recommendations for implementing a retention strategy (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Clark Atlanta University, 2005; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Swail, 2004); however, the research does not provide specific information on leadership and communication strategies nor make connections between the implementation phase for a retention strategy and key leadership and communication theories. Making these connections could assist institutions with developing and implementing new strategies. For instance, the current literature does not mention the advantages or disadvantages of identified leadership styles when implementing an institution

wide retention strategy. Goleman (2000) noted that leaders who have the ability to exhibit several leadership styles tend to be more successful as they have the capacity to adapt to meet the needs of a particular situation or environment. The individual who leads the implementation of a retention strategy is an important factor for an institution to consider.

Organizational communication is the cornerstone of a successful organization. It ties all parties within the organization together to ensure members are aware of their roles and responsibilities which can in turn create a supportive environment for employees. One of the most predominant theories behind organizational communication is the meaning-centred perspective. The key to the meaning-centred approach is to understand what communication is, the meaning behind the message (Shockley-Zalabak, 2006). This approach focuses on organizing information to reduce message equivocality, making decisions to ensure resources are in place to meet organizational goals, influencing interactions between the organization and the individual to produce desired behaviour, and understanding the culture within an organization (Barnlund, 1961; Shockley-Zalabak, 2006). The following statement by Conrad (1985) explains this concept succinctly:

Working relationships can succeed only if the parties involved can achieve at least a minimal degree of understanding and cooperation. To do this, they must understand the meaning of the messages they exchange with each other, access each others motivation to some accuracy and negotiate some arguments about how they act toward one another (p. 10).

Implementing a new retention strategy or changing an existing strategy can be considered a cultural change within an institution. It requires staff and departments to look at student-faculty-institution interactions differently and modify these interactions to ensure students have the greatest opportunity for success. To achieve this, institutional leadership should ensure all members of the community are aware of the retention strategy, the purpose, the goals, and their

roles throughout the process. Considering the differences between the academic, administrative, and student affairs areas of the institution, the meaning-centred approach can help organize information to create a circular process where information loops between the groups implementing the change and those affected by the change. This will reduce message equivocality by ensuring the meaning of the communication and an institution's goals are understood, while providing community members a venue to provide feedback on the changes being implemented. Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue (2001) provided a good example of how the meaning-centred approach can be used to connect the importance of obtaining pan-institution approval and working collaboratively to develop a retention strategy.

### **Government Interest in Student Retention**

Although leadership and communication can assist with implementing a retention strategy, these factors can also assist institutions with defining measures to determine the success of a retention strategy. Measuring success is an important component of any strategy. With respect to student retention, it is increasingly important considering the interest from both the Canadian federal and provincial governments.

For instance, in Ontario, the province is looking at components of student retention to measure institutional accountability (Ontario, 2005, 2007). Accountability measures, such as key performance indicators (KPIs) (e.g., employment rate, government student loan default rates, and graduation rates), are reported annually by colleges and universities. The provincial government also passed the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act (Ontario, 2005) which established agreements with publicly funded institutions to ensure each institution is committed to quality and accessibility (Ontario, 2007).

In examining the key performance indicators the Ontario government established to measure accountability and student success, and given what is known about student retention, there is a clear disconnect, especially for universities. Student loan default rates and employment rates are factors on which an institution can educate students about; however, it is ultimately up to the students to ensure they obtain employment and make payments on their student loans.

Institutions can have an impact on graduation rates; however, the Ontario government has limited the graduate rate measure to a seven-year period and excludes students who transfer between institutions (both into and out of an institution). The graduation rate does not adequately measure an institution's graduation success rate as a number of students stop-out due to work opportunities or life circumstances, or transfer to other institutions due to program availability (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980, 2005; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Ma & Frempong, 2008; Tinto, 1993).

The federal government has also taken an interest in student success and retention, albeit from a slightly different approach than provinces such as Ontario. The federal government appears focused on a student's ability to finance his or her education and student mobility (Canada, 2002, 2007). One of the challenges facing the federal government is the inability to track students throughout the Canadian postsecondary system. This is partially due to the absence of a national student information system that can track student enrolments in postsecondary education and the fact that postsecondary education is mandated as a provincial responsibility (Canada, 1997).

There are a number of initiatives underway to rectify some of these issues such as the Postsecondary Student Information System project (PSIS). This will enable the federal

government to gain a better understanding of Canada's postsecondary market, especially student transfers between postsecondary institutions and related completion rates (Canada, 2002).

Individual provinces, such as British Columbia, are also embarking on similar initiatives. British Columbia has created a personal identification number for all students who enter the province's education system, both the K-12 and the postsecondary sectors. This has enabled the province to track student retention between each level of the educational system, and within levels, such as postsecondary institutions, and to determine program completion rates across the province (Gordon, Gaber & Karlinski, 2008).

When considering the challenges faced by the federal and provincial levels of government with tracking retention and student success, one can postulate that these hurdles are amplified by the lack of a department/ministry for education at the federal level. Canada is one of the few developed nations in the world lacking a federal department for education (Canada, 2002).

The divide between the federal and provincial government interests and level of control over education issues is a result of the historical approach to education in Canada. In Canada, provincial governments are responsible for educational policy and funding decisions (Canada, 1997). This structure was established to enable the development of education policies and programs that met the social, economic, and spiritual needs of a particular region. However, as national mobility increases, professional recognition becomes more important, and as employment and training needs continue to surpass provincial boundaries, there appears to be an increasing need for an overarching national policy that addresses education, training and consistency as it relates to the assessment of professional credentials.

Creating a department for education at the federal level would require a significant discussion, which is not the primary focus of this paper. However, it is worth mentioning within the context of student retention as a federal department could greatly assist with tracking students throughout the Canadian postsecondary system, improve accountability measures, and assist with making improvements to financial support mechanisms for institutions and students.

### **Conclusion**

The study of student retention is a complex web of intricate theories, strategies, and stakeholders. It implies a complex appreciation of the factors driving retention at each institution such that schools are poised to assist students with understanding the academic and social cultures and expectations of the institution. It also helps institutions to gain an understanding of students' intentions and goals related to postsecondary education. It is a mechanism for appreciating the characteristics of the student population, their needs, and what impacts their decision to leave or stay.

A goal of this paper was to investigate the relationship between student persistence and institutional retention to understand why students drop out while others persist. The research to date demonstrates that there is a clear divide in the approaches being used to understand this relationship. Some research focuses on student persistence and the characteristics that persisters are most likely to exhibit, whereas other research focuses on student retention and the characteristics institutions should look for or improve in order to increase their ability to retain students. These are two very different approaches to the same problem. While there are many characteristics involved in both perspectives, the common conclusion drawn when comparing the findings is that institutions cannot focus on one aspect alone. One 'super-characteristic' does not exist that identifies who will persist and who will not. Some of the common characteristics of

persisters include high school average and involvement in leadership activities in high school. However, an institution cannot use these alone as a recipe for building and keeping an incoming class. Although many students who persist may exhibit these qualities, there are a number of other students who do not fit the persister stereotype and are still able to achieve their academic goals, whatever they may be.

The second goal of this paper was to determine if an institution should focus on predicting student persistence as a retention strategy or if an institution should focus more on preventative strategies. Keeping in line with the comments made about student characteristics, it would be very difficult for an institution to focus solely on predicting which students would be most likely to persist at a particular institution. This approach would also prevent students who could be considered late 'academic bloomers' from being admitted to a particular institution. Models that focus on predicting student persistence could be helpful to identify students that may be considered 'at-risk' upon entering an institution. Once these students have been identified, appropriate preventative strategies could be introduced. Again, institutions would have to determine if this would be an appropriate approach to take based on the institution's mandate, enrolment goals, and financial commitment to student retention.

It should also be noted that the ability to measure success requires institutions to define an acceptable retention rate or establish a tool for measurement. Grayson and Grayson (2003) estimated that the Canadian attrition rate is approximately 20-25% from first year to second year and then an additional attrition rate of 20-30% for students beyond second year. This is in line with Day (2001) who stated that the Canadian average rate of attrition was 42% (all years). These figures should be used cautiously as they typically look at system rates as opposed to individual institutions. Also, retention rates do not necessarily account for students who stop out,

transfer to other institutions, or take longer than a traditional student to complete their studies. The target rate of retention should be based on the goals and mandate of an institution and the composition of the student body. Although an ideal retention rate is not known, attempting to achieve a 100% retention rate is not a realistic goal. Students entering postsecondary education are exploring many new aspects of life and are exposed to new opportunities, new ideas, and ultimately new directions; therefore, postsecondary institutions should expect some attrition.

As institutions embark on implementing a retention strategy, the importance placed on leadership and communication become essential. Utilizing organizational communications theories, such as the meaning-centred approach, can greatly assist institutions with navigating the myriad of student retention issues, improving awareness of new directions being implemented and obtaining 'buy-in' from the various units within an institution.

Implementing a retention strategy requires adequate resources, staff and finances, as well as clearly defined expectations to ensure the programs implemented are adequately monitored. Full commitment from an institution is required to implement a student retention program as it can greatly assist an institution with its enrolment objectives, overall enrolment management, budget, and institutional reputation. However, it is not just about the benefits to an institution; focusing on student retention is about helping students and ensuring student success. Improving graduation rates through retention strategies and programming can improve a student's potential to advance her or his socio-economic status and help create a stronger economy. By ensuring students have the resources and tools necessary to make informed decisions, the cognitive skills to succeed, and the opportunities to engage in the social and academic aspects of the postsecondary environment, an institution can assist them with achieving their personal and career goals.

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