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KAMEHAMEHA SCHOOLS

# Factors Influencing Student Retention in Higher Education

A Summary by Umi Jensen

## Introduction

Research has shown that there are not only economic advantages for individuals who obtain college degrees in comparison to those with high school diplomas only, but also increased well-being in terms of health and civic engagement (Day and Newburger 2002; Dee 2004; Ross and Wu 1996). Thus, access to college and college retention are important areas of focus when considering education and its impact on well-being. This brief provides an overview of current theories and research about college retention and student persistence in higher education with particular attention paid to minority students, including Hawaiian and other indigenous groups.<sup>1</sup> Theories point to students' academic, social and cultural integration in the university setting as a major determinant of student retention. In addition, this brief will describe institutional opportunities to culturally integrate students in ways that not only recognize but embrace the cultural capital of minority students. Stemming from the conceptual frame provided by the recognition of social and cultural capital of students, factors that contribute to the successful integration of minority students will also be described.

## Integration and Institutional Commitment to Student Retention

Many of the theories used in studies of college student retention<sup>2</sup> have been developed in reference to a theoretical model of persistence by Tinto (1975). According to Tinto, persistence occurs when a student successfully integrates into the institution academically and socially. Integration, in turn, is influenced by pre-college characteristics and goals, interactions with peers and faculty, and out-of-classroom factors.

Other scholars have built upon the foundation set by Tinto to question the role of the institution in the social and cultural integration and retention of minority students. Challenging the perspective in Tinto's model that retention depends on the student's ability to integrate and assimilate into the institution, Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2004) offered the concept of dual socialization. According to this concept, institutions share responsibility in the successful cultural and social integration of students into college. The authors claim that the assumption that minority students are solely responsible in assimilating and incorporating themselves to the culture of the college excuses institutions from dealing with their own barriers to retention.

<sup>1</sup> See the full literature review by Pacific Policy Resource Center (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Researchers often use the terms 'persistence' and 'retention' interchangeably, but more specifically, retention is an institutional measure while persistence a student measure (i.e. students persist in college while institutions retain students).

Kuh and Love (2004) found that students who made cultural connections through social groups that reflect their culture of origin were more likely to persist in higher education. While such groups may form organically and informally, universities may also foster and create such opportunities to connect.

The cultural integration of minority students may be better understood through the recognition of the power dynamics between dominant and minority cultures in college. Tierney (2004) proposes that students should not be required to leave their identity at home while furthering their education. Tierney’s model of persistence suggests that students need to be provided with the cultural capital necessary to succeed in an educational system where barriers to persistence and integration exist for minority students. Pidgeon (2008) builds on the work of Tierney and calls for institutions to “validate Indigenous capital, epistemologies” (p. 353). In institutions where mainstream culture and values dominate, indigenous understandings and worldviews are often excluded from notions of success in higher education and corresponding retention theories. Acknowledging indigenous and other minority perspectives could greatly inform the development of broader and more effective theories of retention.



Benham (2006) echoes this need to reaffirm indigenous knowledge and finds that successful educational models incorporate cultural identity and cultural capital. Theoretical frameworks that consider factors related to cultural and social capital in general are growing in studies of student retention (see Wells 2008, Astin 1991, Teranishi et al. 2004, Berger 2000). For example, socioeconomic status affects college choice and access directly (Hearn 1991) and indirectly through often coinciding with a lack of social and cultural capital, such as the knowledge of which ‘signals’ to transmit to college admission offices (McDonough 1994). To promote the integration and retention of minority students, higher education institutions could recognize and honor the cultural capital of minority students. At the same time, programs and communities need to increase minority students’ awareness of the social and cultural knowledge necessary to enter into and finish college.

### Factors Influencing Student Retention

Scholarship on retention and persistence has increasingly incorporated the work of theorists such as Tierney and has acknowledged the importance of cultural and social capital for student retention in higher education. As such, much of the current research attempts to identify and tease apart the many factors of one’s cultural and social capital as they relate to retention in higher education programs. Table 1 below summarizes the key factors that are critical to student success and retention, tiered into individual, institutional, and social levels.

**Table 1. Factors and Contributing Measures Influencing Retention**

Factors Influencing Retention	Examples
Individual Level	
Academic Performance	College GPA and academic performance, high school GPA, course load and credits earned, academic self-discipline
Attitudes and Satisfaction	Positive attitude about academics, commitment to college, sense of belonging and social connectedness
Institutional Level	
Academic Engagement	Undergraduate research activities, university size, opportunities to join clubs
Social and External Level	
Social and Family Support	Faculty and staff support, family support, familiar and authentic cultural environment, sense of belonging and community, mattering or sense of importance

#### Individual Level

##### *Academic Performance*

Local and national research identifies factors such as academic performance as predictors for college persistence that can play a huge part in college matriculation and retention. In their longitudinal study, Makuakane-Drechsel and Hagedorn (2000) found that GPA was the most significant predictor of persistence for both liberal arts and vocational community college students of Hawaiian ancestry, with financial aid being the second most significant predictor. Hagedorn, Lester, Moon, and Tibbetts (2006) made similar findings in that high school GPA was a significant factor in attaining a bachelor’s degree. Also, a higher number of credit hours was also a significant predictor of college persistence in related studies (Kiser and Price 2008; Makuakane-Drechsel and Hagedorn 2000). These findings may be particularly relevant for Native Hawaiians, as Benham (2006) found that many Native Hawaiian students have comparatively low test scores, high school graduation rates, and post-secondary enrollment than their peers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a snapshot of Native Hawaiians in post-high education see Post-High Update 2010 at [www.ksbe.edu/SPI/Annual\\_update\\_series.php](http://www.ksbe.edu/SPI/Annual_update_series.php).

Academic performance does not simply refer to GPA but also to academic discipline.<sup>4</sup> In a national study of factors related to third-year college retention, Allen et al. (2008) found that “academic self-discipline, pre-college academic performance, and pre-college educational development have indirect effects on retention and transfer” (p. 647). Also, they found that the academic achievement of freshmen was influenced by academic self-discipline, suggesting an indirect effect of academic discipline on academic performance, a very strong predictor of college retention, for both under- and upperclassmen in college.

#### *Attitudes and Satisfaction*

In addition to academic performance, student attitudes and satisfaction also have an effect on retention and were prevalent themes within the retention literature. Nes, Evans, and Segerstrom (2009) found that dispositional and academic optimism were associated with better motivation and adjustment, reduced drop-out rates, and higher GPA. They concluded that with increased self-efficacy and a “belief in a positive outcome, students can succeed in the academic world, regardless of whether or not they are optimists” (p.1908). Allen et al (2008) also found that students’ college commitment and social connectedness directly affected retention for third-year students in their study.

In a study of Asian/Pacific Islander student satisfaction, Orsuwan and Cole (2007) found that greater social connectedness or sense of belonging had a significant association with greater educational satisfaction. They argued that academic integration alone is not sufficient to explain the retention of ethnic minority students, who experience different and often lower degrees of social integration when compared to racial majority students. Opportunity structures, or institutionally provided opportunities for minority students to integrate, matter as “those students who have a significant amount of opportunity tend to be satisfied with their institution, have high aspirations, have high self esteem, and exhibit optimism with the economic or social payoff” (p.67). Furthermore, while ethnicity did not directly affect student experiences, its interaction with background characteristics affecting the cultural capital of students (i.e., parental education, household income) led to differences in satisfaction. Hawaiian students in their study, “especially from low-income and low-parental-education backgrounds, may be less satisfied with their educational experience as they try to navigate a system of which they know little” (p. 81).

#### **Institutional Level**

##### *Academic Engagement*

Academic engagement activities such as undergraduate research were found to have a positive influence on retention. Applying Tinto’s model, Townsend and Wilson (2009) found that the social and academic integration of predominately Caucasian students in their study were affected by “university size, the opportunity to

<sup>4</sup> Academic self-discipline, also referred to as academic discipline, is defined in the Student Readiness Inventory scale as the “amount of effort a student puts into schoolwork and the degree to which a student is hardworking and conscientious” (see [www.act.org/sri/components.html](http://www.act.org/sri/components.html)).

join clubs in their major, and the opportunity to conduct research with a professor” (p. 405). In another study with a more ethnically diverse pool of participants, Jones, Bartlow, and Villarejo (2010) conclude that participation in research may help to integrate underrepresented minority students into the institution and to prepare them for graduate education and careers in the sciences.



#### **Social and External Level**

##### *Social Support and Family*

Similar to the positive relationship between social integration student retention, Nicpon et al. (2006) found that higher levels of social support relate to greater persistence and fewer feelings of loneliness, but did not relate to academic achievement. Dixon, Rayle, and Chung (2007) also found that “mattering” to the college environment, defined as the “experience of others depending on us, being interested in us, and being concerned with our fate” was linked to persistence (p. 22). Specific forms of social support provided by colleges, such as cohorts (Harris 2006) and learning communities (Tinto 2004) help students share academic experiences together, thus linking academic and social integration.

For minority students, especially Native Americans, social support and family matter greatly in their retention and successful college experience. According to Larimore and McClellan (2005), “support from family, supportive staff and faculty, institutional commitment, personal commitment, and connections to homeland and culture” (p. 19) are factors that influence the persistence of Native American students. These supports and other characteristics are prevalent in tribal colleges, which are often located on or near a reservation, are imbued with the local native culture, and are seen as “a family support system” (Rousey and Longie 2001, p. 1500). Guillory and Wolverton (2008) found that the three most important factors in helping students persist were family, giving back to the tribal community, and social support. Native American students also said that tribal community and family fostered their desire and determination to finish school.

These findings are also particularly relevant for Native Hawaiian students. For example, Benham (2006) argues that successful models for increasing academic achievement and persistence of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders include “individualized instruction within a collective community of learners setting” (p. 40). Hawaiian perspectives of learning often emphasize context and are built around relationships; themes from surveys of Hawaiian educators indicated “successful learning experiences for Hawaiian students must take place in a culturally authentic physical and social learning environment” (Kawakami 1999, p. 26).

## Conclusion

Current theoretical frameworks for understanding student retention are integrating Indigenous perspectives on education and placing greater responsibility on institutions to remove systematic obstacles for college completion. There are various barriers to retention; for minority students, and Hawaiian students in particular, finding ways to reduce financial, academic, cultural, and social barriers are critical to college success. Although the literature on Hawaiian students’ persistence is small, models that address student retention of other minority students are relevant as they aim to assist students in financial and academic need and encourage their social and cultural connectedness and integration.

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