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PREVIEW

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Early identification of persisting and nonpersisting college students

Schkade, Anthony Roland, Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1989

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PREVIEW

EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF PERSISTING
AND NONPERSISTING COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Anthony R. Schkade

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska

In partial fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of
Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Ronald Joekel

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1989

TITLE

EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF PERSISTING AND NONPERSISTING

COLLEGE STUDENTS

BY

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EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF PERSISTING AND NONPERSISTING COLLEGE STUDENTS

Anthony R. Schkade, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1989

Adviser: Ronald Joeckel

The purpose of the study was to determine the potential usefulness of information contained in the college freshman's American College Testing Program (ACT) Assessment for determining those factors or combination of factors that would identify students who have a high probability of being a persisting or nonpersisting college student.

The study compared the ACT Assessment results for persisting and nonpersisting students who enrolled in the fall semester of 1982-83, 1983-84, and 1984-85. There were 7720 students in the study who met the selection criteria. There were 1606 nonpersisting students, those students who did not enroll at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln the fall semester immediately following the freshmen year, and 6114 persisting students.

The independent variables in the study were the scores and the 161 variables on the ACT Assessment.

Descriptive statistics were assessed for the two groups of students, persisting and nonpersisting, followed by factor analysis. After a factor analysis was done to decrease the number of variables into seven construct variables was completed, a discriminate analysis was performed on the seven construct variables. Because of the conflict in the literature as to using dichotomous variables in factor analysis, a second discriminate analysis based on all variables was done. A third discriminate analysis was done using only the seven major variables of the 54 variables found in the second discriminate analysis. The seven major factors found were high school GPA, plan to be employed while in college, ACT

composite score, prefer to attend UNL, plan to join a fraternity/sorority, amount of high school math, and high school accomplishments in music.

The descriptive statistics presented differences in responses to the ACT variables by persisting and nonpersisting students. Some of the findings from the descriptive statistics were that persisting students tend: to come from smaller high schools; to have better high school grades; to come from greater distances; to come from the upper quartiles of their high school class; to have participated in more activities in high school; to have worked fewer hours in employment; to come from smaller high schools and towns, and to come from smaller families with higher incomes.

In essence, the descriptive statistics presented a difference in the responses to the ACT Assessment by persisting and nonpersisting student groupings, but the difference in responses between the two groups was statistically so insignificant as to prevent the classification of a student as persisting or nonpersisting based on the student's responses to the variables.

PREVIEW

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"To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault be all glory and honor and with great joy — to the only God, our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!" (Jude 11:24 N.I.V.)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Context of the Problem	1
Impact of Declining Enrollment	3
Solutions	5
Theoretical Framework	7
Purpose of the Study	9
Research Questions	9
Definitions	9
Assumptions	10
Delimitations	11
Limitations	11
Significance of the Study	12
Overview	15
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	16
Significant Historical Factors	16
The Two Camps	17
Factors and Findings Since the 1960s	19
Summary of the Review of Literature	33
3. METHODOLOGY	35
Design	35
Population	36
Procedures	38
Data Analysis	41
Frequency Analysis	43
Factor Analysis	44

Discriminate Analysis.	47
Classification Matrix	51
Summary of Chapter 3	51
4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF DATA	53
Descriptive Analysis	53
Population Description	54
Descriptive Statistics for Numerically Scaled Variables	58
Descriptive Statistics for ACT Qualitative Variables	59
Factor Analysis	62
Scree Test.	64
The First Discriminate Analysis	70
Classification Results for the First Discriminate Analysis	73
The Second Discriminate Analysis	75
Classification Results for the Second Discriminate Analysis	77
The Third Analysis	78
Summary	83
5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.	84
Summary of the Findings.	84
Findings from the Descriptive Statistics	85
Persisting Students	85
Nonpersisting Students	88
Significance of the Findings	94
Significance for Administrators	94
Significance for Researchers	96
Limitations of the Study	96
Future Research	97
Summary	98

REFERENCES	100
APPENDIX 1	106
Table 1, Copy of ACT Assessment Guide Booklet	106
Table 2, Copy of ACT Registration Form	139
APPENDIX 2, Copy of the ACT Report	144
APPENDIX 3	147
Table 1, Copies of Request to use ACT Information Letters	147
Table 2, Copies of Permission Letters to Copy and to Use ACT Information	151
APPENDIX 4, Description of ACT Variables	154
APPENDIX 5, Coding Values of ACT Variables	163
APPENDIX 6, Excluded ACT Variables	173
APPENDIX 7	177
Table 1, ACT Numerically Scaled Variables	177
Table 2, ACT Qualitative Variables	186
APPENDIX 8, County of Residence	209
APPENDIX 9, Commuality Scores	212
APPENDIX 10, Pooled With-in Groups Correlations Between Discriminating Variables in the Second Discriminate Analysis	215
APPENDIX 11, Wilks' Lambda, Order of Entry and Canonical Correlation for ACT Variables in the Second Discriminate Analysis	218
APPENDIX 12, Standardized Coefficients for the 54 ACT Variables in the Second Discriminate Analysis	220
APPENDIX 13, Variable Names, Means, Standard Deviations, and Number of Cases for Each Variable Included in the Factor Analysis	222
APPENDIX 14, Scree Plot for the Seven Factor Solution	225

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
4.1	Number of Students by Year and Percent of Freshmen Students from Each Academic Year	55
4.2	Number of First-time Freshman Nebraska Resident Students Submitting ACT Scores and Profiles by Year and by Category	55
4.3	Number of Students by Sex Classification, by Grouping and Percentage	56
4.4	Grade Level for Students at the Time of Taking the ACT Assessment by Persisting and Nonpersisting Groupings	56
4.5	Number of Students by Year of Birth, by Group and by Percentage	57
4.7	Factors Derived from ACT Variables with Eigenvalues Above 1.0 and Percentage of Variance Accounted for by the Factor	63
4.8	Scree Plot of Eigenvalues and Number of Factors for Principle Axis Factoring for ACT Variables	65
4.9	Seven Factor Solution for Factor Analysis for ACT Variables	67
4.10	Verimax Factor Loading for ACT Variables	68
4.11	Names for the Pooled Factors Obtained Through Factor Analysis and Renamed as Computed Variables	69
4.12	Standardized and Unstandardized Canonical Discriminate Function Coefficients for Computed Variables: Academic Measures, Extracurricular Plans, High School Accomplishments, Co-curricular Interests, the Community, Occupation, and Working While in College	70
4.13	Pooled With-in Groups Correlations Between Discriminating Variables and the Canonical Discriminate Function for the Computed Variables: Academic Measures, Extra-curricular Plans, High School Accomplishments, Co-curricular Interests, the Community, Occupation, and Working While in College	71

4.14	Wilks' Lambda and F-ratio for the Computed Variables: Academic Measures, Extra-curricular Plans, High School Accomplishments, Co-curricular Interests, the Community, Occupation, and Working While in College	72
4.15	Summary Table for Discriminate Analysis: Contributions of the Canonical Discriminate Function in Discriminating Between Persistence and Nonpersistence in College	73
4.16	Classification of Group Membership Based on the Computed Variables for Group Membership and the Prior Probability of Group Membership . . .	74
4.17	Classification of Group Membership Based on the Discriminating Scores for 54 Variables to Determine "Best Fit"	78
4.18	Wilks' Lambda, Order of Entry, and Canonical Correlation for the Seven Variable Discriminate Analysis	79
4.19	Pooled Within-Groups Correlations, Standardized Coefficients, and Unstandardized Coefficients for Seven Variables in the Third Discriminate Analysis	80
4.20	Classification of Group Membership based on the Seven Variables in the Third Discriminate Analysis and the Prior Probability of Group Membership	82

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Problem

Institutions of higher education are faced with major problems in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Mayhew (1980) listed the following problems that will be faced: declining student enrollments, unionization, state and federal government requirements, pressures of higher education coordinating boards, inflation, increased litigation involving colleges and universities, and competition between institutions for students.

From now to the year 2000, administrators in institutions of higher education will have to be creative to overcome the major problems (Corson, 1960). In order for administrators within institutions of higher education to be creative and be able to respond to the problems, they must deal with the specific issues and resolve these in a realistic and practical way. No matter what the administrators do, they may not be able to resolve issues that are beyond their control, such as government requirements, pressure from coordinating boards, inflation, litigation, state and federal requirements, and the declining birth rate.

The problem of competition between institutions cannot be eliminated by the very nature that it is one of the driving forces to encourage institutions to improve and excel. Competition for students cannot be eliminated because institutions do not mark a student as selected and inform other institutions not to recruit the student. The student has the opportunity to select which institution to attend. Therefore, competition for students between institutions by its very nature cannot be eliminated as a problem. The only way to eliminate the problem of competition for students is not to recruit students, and this is self defeating for an institution.

One of the problems identified by Mayhew that can be dealt with by administrators within an institution, is the problem of declining enrollment. Administrators can have a significant impact on the problem of declining enrollment, but these administrators need

research information, a theory base to operate from to give direction toward the problem resolution, and some means of obtaining the specific information necessary to deal with the problem (Jones, 1986). Because the problem of a declining enrollment involves many different variables and is unique to each individual institution, the solution to the problem will also have to be related to a specific institution.

The problem of solving the declining enrollment by attracting more students is not viable. Institutions have always recruited students even when the institutions were turning down students because of the lack of room to serve them. Institutions recruit and compete to attract quality students and to develop a pool from which to select students for admission. Some institutions have attempted to draw students from a different segment of the population than the traditional college age segment. Institutions trying to attract students from a different segment of the population have had only limited success. For the University of Nebraska-Lincoln the problem is complicated by the fact that the University has had a decrease in the non-traditional age student category. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln enrollments of adult (non-traditional age) students in the Division of Continuing Studies actually declined by over 1,000 enrollments from a high of 3,530 in 1978-79 to 2,456 enrollments in 1983-84 (R. Abbott, personal communication, January 26, 1989).

The lack of success in attracting a different segment of the population into higher education is primarily because of the conflicting demands placed on the time this nontraditional college age segment of the population has for education. Work, family, community, and civic organizations demand the time of the nontraditional college age students, and therefore, when they do attend, these students tend to enroll in only one or two classes instead of the five or six classes selected by the traditional college-age students.

Because there is competition between institutions to attract students, and the other sources for students for the institution are limited, a major problem exists. How can an

institution maintain a stable enrollment or even increase enrollment when the pool of college age students is smaller, competition for the students is keener, and there is a limited source of nontraditional college age students to add to the pool of students?

Impact of Declining Enrollment

The possibility of a declining enrollment for any institution can have a dramatic effect on the institution. Some institutions have already experienced the results of a decline in enrollment. The institutions who have experienced a decline in enrollment have found the following downward spiral of events. Decreased enrollment meant decreased tuition. Decreased tuition meant decreased operating funds and decreased operating funds also brought about some faculty layoffs.

The possibility of a decrease in tuition funds because of a decrease in enrollment for any institution can mean lower salary raises or no raises for staff and faculty within the institution. Fixed operating cost for an institution must still be covered. The fixed costs for an institution include such items as the cost for heating, cooling, and operating the physical plant. Compounding the problem of covering fixed costs was the increased inflation rate that occurred in the late 1970s which drove up fixed costs.

To cover increasing costs and provide funds for faculty salary increases, many institutions in the late 1970s raised tuition charges. The results of this tuition increase action were: (1) a decrease in the number of students in the pool of students who could afford to attend the institution and (2) a greater competition between similar institutions for the same students. The result for these institutions was a downward spiral of retrenchment, and declining enrollment.

Some state-supported institutions tried to make up the lost revenue because of declining enrollment by asking for additional appropriations from state legislatures. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is an example of this type of action. The University of

Nebraska asked the state for increases in appropriations and received less than requested, received mid-year budget cuts because of the decline of the agricultural economy within the state, increased tuition costs, and experienced a decline in student enrollment because of the decline in the birth rate.

How can the downward trend of decreasing enrollment for an institution be stopped or reversed? Stabilizing the enrollment of the institution is a major step to improving the situation. If stabilizing enrollment can be accomplished, it will have to be done at each specific institution since all institutions of higher education are different, are administered and are regulated differently, are located in different locales, and serve different clienteles of students. Students are not assigned to a specific institution. They choose which institution to attend for various reasons. Through competition some institutions will maintain a stable enrollment and may even increase their enrollment, but other institutions could have a severe drop in enrollment. Therefore, stabilizing or avoiding a possible enrollment decline is a problem that is specific to each institution.

There are few avenues available for changing a declining enrollment pattern, especially when the pool of possible students is declining and other sources of students are not there. One possibility that does have hope for an institution of higher education is to retain the students that do enroll and to try to attract those students who will persist once they enroll.

Because the resolution to the problem of changing the pattern of declining enrollment is institution-specific, an examination must be made of a specific institution to find ways to resolve the problem. By understanding what can be done at one specific institution, other institutions can benefit (Jones, 1986).

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for example, in 1983-84 enrolled only 907 or 22% of the 4,121 who came as freshmen in 1979-80. In less than four years, 3,214 or 78% of the original class of 4,121 student dropped out of the University. A few students

may have accelerated their degree programs by attending the University year-around, but this is rare, since the average student enrolls for four or more years to complete a degree program.

The Student Retention Project (Patterson, Barnes, Boettcher & Nelson, 1983) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln studied the periods of withdrawal for the 3,648 students in the freshmen class of 1982-83. In their sample of 228 students from the pool of 657 new freshmen who formally withdrew during the fall semester 1982-83, they found that 28.9 percent (with a 95 percent confidence level) of the freshmen withdrew by the end of the first two weeks of the term. By the end of the 4th week of classes, 54.8 percent of the withdrawals had occurred for the fall semester. During the same semester, an estimated group of about 350 freshmen had "walked off" (unofficially withdrew) the campus without completing the semester's course work. This loss of new freshmen represents a large loss of tuition over a four year period. Having some of these students persist instead of dropping out would have a significant impact on stabilizing the enrollment.

Solutions

The first prong of the attack to stabilize the enrollment pattern should be to help students become persisting students. Only a small percentage change can have a dramatic effect on an institution's enrollment. A decrease of a few percentage points in the attrition rate for an institution amounts to a large enrollment increase over a span of four years.

Research by Beal and Noel (1980) points out that efforts can be made to retain students if special services can be provided to those who need the service. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, like other institutions facing declining enrollment and financial constraints, does not have the resources to provide special services to all new first-time students. Besides, some new first-time freshmen do not need the services because they will persist. Submitting a persisting student to a special program to encourage persistence

may cause the student to leave (Noel, 1978). The problem exists of how to identify students who are likely to drop out once they enroll and be able to provide the services as early as possible to help those students who are thinking about leaving, especially when some students leave so early in the freshmen year.

The second prong of the attack is to reach out to attract those students who will persist at a particular institution (Tinto & Wallace, 1985).

There is no instrument or measurement presently that can be found in the literature that can be used to measure early enough if a student is likely to persist or not persist (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980). Some mechanism needs to be developed or some means of identification is needed to classify students before their arrival on campus as to whether the student is likely or not likely to persist. If the students can be identified early, those students needing special services can be directed in the appropriate channel and the institution can make efficient use of the limited resources for special services. Students, identified as persisters, can be excluded from the special services route. The officials in institutions could accomplished a three-fold mission: (a) identify the potential drop out students for special services; (b) save money by not providing special services to all students; and (c) eliminate the possibility of having persisting students leave because of an "undue" requirement of participating in a special service program.

If there was some way to identify persisting and nonpersisting students before the students' arrival on campus the freshmen year, an institution can reduce the problem of a declining enrollment by retaining a larger percentage of the students that do enroll. Declining enrollment is a major issue for higher education institutions and an issue which an institution can work toward solving. The size of the pool of future college students for the 1990s is known because these students are now in elementary and secondary schools. The size of the pool of college students for the 1990s is no larger than the pool of students for the 1970s and 1980s. The sheer competition between institutions for students

eliminates the possibility of an institution drawing a larger number of students from the pool of potential students.

Theoretical Framework

Research in higher education student retention is limited in scope to the time span after students arrive on campus and decide to leave. Tinto (1975) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) studied the differences in persisting students and drop-outs. Their studies centered on the reasons "why" some students persisted and others did not. Other studies have attempted to try to identify "who" were the potential dropouts. All of these "who" studies used information obtained after the students enrolled in a particular institution. The research literature does not reflect any record of a study being conducted that tried to identify persisting and nonpersisting students before the students' arrival on a college or university campus. Because of this lack in the research literature of a study of college bound students before their arrival on campus, this study is being undertaken.

Although higher education is not profit-driven as the world of business, much can be learned from the business world which can have implications for higher education. There are some similarities between higher education and business. In the business world, the field of marketing encompasses the study of the customer and consumer of products, and services. In education, the word marketing has in recent years appeared in the job description for admissions personnel in the Chronicle of Higher Education. The field of education has created its own pseudo-term for marketing which is "Enrollment Management". The attempt in education is to draw into service marketing people who know how to reach the "right" students and attract them to a particular institution. The person doing the marketing work in higher education is called an Enrollment Manager. The position of enrollment manager has been or is in the process of being established in many colleges and universities.

Because the concept of marketing has been drawn into higher education indirectly, consideration should be given to the theories within the business world that have implications for, or are being applied to, the field of higher education by enrollment managers.

Peter F. Drucker has been one of the prolific writers in the area of management and marketing. His case studies and theories are some of the premier works in the world of business. Drucker (1973) points out in his study of business that Sears, Roebuck, and Company became very successful and was successful even during the poor economic times of the depression during the 1920s and 1930s. He states that Sears was successful because Sears studied the customers who used its products. The Sears Company made for itself the policy of knowing their customers, their demographics, their realities, and their values. Sears directed catalogues of merchandise to that group of people who Sears had learned from studying the demographics of its current customers who were satisfied with Sears products, would be by all indications potential customers. Sears concentrated its marketing efforts on this, identified, stratum of the population. Sears had studied the demographics, attitudes, needs, likes, and dislikes of its customers so well that Sears could identify future customers before they were born. Sears, Drucker feels, was successful because it knew the characteristics, written and unwritten, of its clientele. Sears even knew in advance, through the study of the demographics of its customers, which customer was likely to return a product because of some dissatisfaction at the time the customer purchased the product. Sears' approach was "Satisfaction guaranteed or money back."

Drucker points out that the aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well that the product or service fits him and sells itself. To know and understand the customer is to study the customer and analyze what the customer may be saying in a silent way about the product or service he selected or did not select.

Although "satisfaction guaranteed or money back" is not realistic in higher education, studying the consumer of higher education so well that it might be possible to identify the persisting or nonpersisting student before the student's arrival on campus is realistic. A side benefit of the study for an enrollment administrator is the description of the type of student who would be "satisfied with the product" and persist. It is to this group of people that the administrator could concentrate the recruitment efforts and attract those students that would offer stability of enrollment in an institution. With this concept of "knowing the student", this study is being undertaken.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the potential usefulness of information contained in the college freshman's American College Testing Program (ACT) Assessment, including the test scores and the self-reported profile, for determining those factors or combination of factors that would identify students who have a high probability of being a persisting or nonpersisting college student.

Research Questions

1. Do the scores on the American College Testing Program delineate the persisting and nonpersisting student?
2. Are there indicators in the ACT Assessment (self-reported profile) that would identify a persisting or a nonpersisting student?

Definitions

1. Persisting student. A student who enrolled in the fall semester as a first-time freshman and re-enrolled in the immediate following fall semester.
2. Nonpersisting student. A student who enrolled in the fall semester as a first-time freshman, may have dropped out of college sometime during the first year, but did not