AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MOTIVATION AND THE INTENTION TO STAY IN A HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM
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Abstract
Retention within the higher education community is an area of great concern to many colleges and university administrators. It is a statistic which many institutions publish on behalf of their admissions department and one which they constantly look to improve. The following is a research study which looks into the relationship between motivation and the intent to stay in a higher education program. A model of the motivation for students to stay in an academic program developed by Young (2004) was used as the framework for this study. The specific motivational variables which will be utilized in this study are interest in coursework, role models, encouragement and age.

Introduction
The decision of whether or not to pursue a college degree can be viewed as a very important step in career preparation as many careers require additional schooling beyond high school for entry. Still the decisions to not only pursue higher education but, to stay with a program until completion can often be difficult for many students. Studies have shown a university degree may enable a person to compete in a difficult market and their rate of unemployment is often lower than that of people with no higher education (NCVER, 1999; Lamb, 2001). Nationwide, more than half of those who enroll in public colleges or universities drop out before they earn a bachelor’s degree (Worthen, 1998). At Lamar University in Beaumont Texas the school’s enrollment has declined by 20% in recent years with a particularly low retention rate for freshmen (Montano & Utter, 1999). These students met all the admissions requirements for the schools in which they enrolled – the University of Nebraska or Ohio State, for example (Worthen). “While the percentages vary among institutions, it has been remarkably consistent overall” (Worthen, p. 62). Although many of the students make rational decision to leave higher education, most drop out because they have not developed the attitudes and skills necessary to become successful learners (Worthen). Unfortunately for many higher education programs retention is a key to the success of the student. The purpose of this paper is to determine the extent to which specific motivator variables influence the likelihood of students staying in a program of study.

The Problem with Retention

The available research demonstrates the need to understand why student’s retention issues in higher education should be addressed. According to Worthen (1998) “Those who don’t earn a college degree are also more likely to commit a crime and die sooner than those who graduate” (p. 63). Worthen continues to stress the need to address higher education retention with the following

These people – who have already demonstrated to the satisfaction of the admissions office that they are capable of college work – join a workforce that many suggest is already undereducated. It’s clear their earning will be significantly less than those who have a college degree. As citizens they are less likely to participate in the democratic process. They will pay less in federal, state and local taxes and are more likely to need support from government social services (Worthen, p. 63).

According to Worthen (1998) if we want to pursue of a truly global economy than a better educated workforce must be a top priority within American culture. Higher education needs to educate more people and more effectively than it is currently doing (Worthen). More students need to graduate and gain the knowledge, skills and attitudes of inquiry that encourages them to be continuous learners (Worthen). While there are many examples of bright, highly motivated students who are successful in college there are still too many who are not successful. Therefore colleges need to find ways to engage the equally bright, but less motivated, student in their pursuit of a degree. Certainly these students do not lack ability as they met the requirements to gain entry into the respective program. Perhaps the students...
who are not successful do not know how to learn or are dealing with issues that could be better addressed by the college. As Worthen states, “They haven’t discovered the rewards of delayed gratification or how to plan for the future beyond tomorrow” (p. 63).

According to Turner, Lesseig and Fulmer (2006) the proper motivation is key to success for any student. Many researchers agree that motivating students is a primary task of educators (Turner et al). Though most researchers seem to agree to there is no “magic bullet” to motivation (Cox, 2000). As stated previously the question is why do students choose to leave higher education when a great deal of time and often expense was spent on gaining entrance to the program. An understanding of student’s motivations for pursuing higher education might allow some modification of student recruitment methods, institutional and teaching strategies and therefore increase retention overall (Bennett, 2004).

At one South African university the graduation rates were so low that the Department of Education began investigating the problem (Watson M., Mcsorley, Foxcroft & Watson, A, 2004). According to the Minister of Education, Kadar Asmal, in his report of February 2001

Retention rates would have to improve from the current 15% to at least 30% over the next five years. It is thus imperative that those learners who will succeed academically are identified and their developmental needs addressed (Ministry of Education, 2001).

At what point might we face the same challenges in the United States? This is the problem which is being addressed throughout the world.

The research of Young (2004) regarding the motivations for students to stay in an academic program was used as the framework for this study. Here the problem of student retention was researched in depth and a practical framework of variables was offered as possible areas which could be addressed to improve on this problem. Young felt the key to student retention and success in any higher education program was motivation (Young). Therefore motivation was studied through in-depth interviews and through these interviews the important motivating variables were discovered (Young).

The Theory Regarding Retention

The motivation to learn has long been considered an important predictor of learning and training effectiveness (Campbell, 1989). Learning motivation has been defined as the willingness to attend and learn material presented in a higher education program (Noe, 1986). “Whereas ability accounts for what individuals can do, motivation to learn influences the decision-making processes determining the direction focus, and level of effort individuals will apply to a learning activity” (Noe, Wilk, Mullen & Wanek, 1997). Therefore how does motivation affect retention within the college programs?

It is generally agreed that motivation has an effect on student performance and learning (Turner et al, 2006). The more often students realize the importance of the concepts learned in class the greater their interest and motivation will be during class (Turner et al).

Students can often feel overwhelmed by the numerous responsibilities associated with being a college student (Cole, Field & Harris, 2004). As a result, some will suffer a loss in motivation to perform and, even worse, a few will experience a severe state of depressed mood (Cole et al). Therefore it is imperative that the concerns of students be addressed and some specific recommendation be implemented by universities and instructors to possibly change these outcomes.

What can be done to increase the motivation of students especially is the critical freshman year. For example, according to a study which was conducted with first year accounting students, many of these students did not perceive much value from their initial courses (Turner et al, 2006). The purpose of their study was to determine if motivation could be increased by showing the relevance of the course material to a student. Through this research they determined that many freshman and sophomore
students recognized the importance of the courses but, still lacked enthusiasm. The motivational tool they employed was based on the presumption that the more students believe they will apply the concepts of the course to their career, the greater their interest and enthusiasm for the course. The results were encouraging and showed that relating concepts to chosen professions clearly enhanced the learning process and made the course more interesting and relevant to students.

According to Colquitt, LePine and Neo (2000) dispositional, attitudinal and situational characteristics are predictors of learning motivation. This would be at the beginning of their college career. Still, according to Noe (1986) learning motivation is malleable and changes over time. He postulates that one can expect that a student’s level of learning motivation to change over the course of the term. It might increase, decrease or stay the same depending on the situational characteristics they find themselves in (Cole et al, 2004). They tell us that when the motivational level of the student is low or the academic environment is perceived as stressful, then the acquisition of knowledge is likely to suffer. This is further upheld by Brackney and Karabenick, (1995) who state if students evaluate academic demands as a threat, and appropriate coping mechanisms are not in place, they are likely to experience a decrease in motivation and effort. How might this research be relevant to this study?

Young (2004) addressed this problem through a study of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Australia who often did not work toward a college degree. Here a qualitative approach to the issue was taken through extensive interviews of students who had completed a high school degree. Specifically the region of Elizabeth was chosen because it was identified as having the third lowest rate of university participation in Australia (7.6%). The average rate for Australia is 24.2% and therefore people from Elizabeth were accessing higher education at less than 1/3 the national average.

The sample in Young’s study included 28 participants who lived in the region and had the basic qualification to attend higher education and be successful. Twelve of these people had progressed straight from high school to college and 16 had at some point left high school believing that to be the end of their education.

From the 28 interview transcripts five motivator variables emerged. These motivator categories are nature of work, interest, role models, competition and encouragement (Young, 2004). In this research barriers to the successful achievement of a degree were also noted,

One would expect barriers encountered by individuals would be multiple, occurring in a variety of forms across a long span of time from the point where individuals begin to consider university study to that of granting with a degree (Young, 2004, p. 439).

In the study conducted by Young (2004) these barriers were distance from the college, Geographical discrimination, isolation and finances. For the current study these barriers (controls) were changed to marital status, gender and employment status as these are assumed to impact a student’s ability to be successful in college in the United States.

According to Young (2004) barriers related strongly to the experiences noted in the interviews. In development of Young’s motivators model it was noted that there is a process involved where individuals took information from their environment and converted this into self-expectation before they could access higher education. Young defines barriers as factors that prevent or obstruct the development of such an expectation within the mind of the student.

The specific variables in the model emerged through the interviews. For example, nature of work emerged from the positive and negative aspects of school work during the interviews. Positive being the kind of work that people would like to do and negative being the kind of work that people would prefer not to do (Young, 2004). Many of the participants noted the importance of these positive and negative aspects as motivators for going to college and completing a
degree. The negative aspects of school, such as the treatment by the teachers, were found to be particularly strong in relation to motivation.

Interest became an important variable in the model as it involved a desire to study either a general or a specific subject. For many of the participants their level of interest was regulated by, “a push of discomfort and the pull of hope” (Young, 2004, p. 451). This is further described as the following:

Change in individuals is often brought about by the dual pressure of a person’s circumstances being uncomfortable, unhappy, unfulfilling juxtaposed against the vision and promise that thing can be improved (Young, 2004, p. 451).

Six of the participants noted that a negative Nature of Work was juxtaposed with the pull of hope for a better life. Therefore this hope for a better life and the material things which come as a result of this life had a positive effect on their interest in the work. role models became evident as being important and the participants noted with great pride how they were often the first in their families to qualify for college.

Encouragement became evident as another important variable as the participants talked of the importance of encouragement from adults in their lives. In particular encouragement from their parents to attend college. Through the study it became evident that many of the parents were hampered by a lack of information regarding college and this had a significant impact on their ability to encourage their children. “Parents who are not aware of the potential benefits of higher education may well fear the financial and social implication for both their children and themselves” (Young, 2004, p. 441).

Role Models were shown to be an important variable during the research process. Many of the participants who had contact with professionals were shown to be more interesting in pursuing a higher degree. 17 of the participants noted a person in their lives who could be interpreted as a positive role model.

Based upon the available literature on this topic the research question which will be addressed during this study will be:

1. What is the relationship between interest in coursework, role models, encouragement and age to a student staying in a higher education program?

The research of Young (2004) was chosen because it studied the effect of specific motivating variables on the ability of students to be successful in college.

In this study nature of work and interest have been collapsed into one independent variable called interest in coursework, role model is defined as the educational level achieved by the student’s role model, encouragement is defined as the level of encouragement received from faculty members and competition was changed to age.

Thus:

\[ \text{H1: The motivating variables of interest in coursework, role model, encouragement and age have a positive effect on the intention of the student to remain in a higher education program.} \]

Method

Sample

The participants in this study were current students in the Weekend College Program at Lakeland Community College. This is a program which has been in effect for only three years and the total population is relatively small. Therefore all current students (93) were sampled for this study. The participants were given full disclosure of my role as researcher and also my role as a previous instructor in the Weekend College program. Some of the participants were previous students in my courses. The research objectives were clearly explained to all participants and the collection procedures explained. It was important that the participants understood that all data would be completely anonymous. The final sample which was used for analysis included 50 respondents and there were 43 non-respondents.
Measures

The data collection method which was employed for this study used a number of measures to collect data for testing the motivating variables. Specifically the Overall Job Satisfaction Survey (Brayfield and Rothe, 1951) was used to measure interest in coursework. This measure had an alpha level of .05 and interest in coursework was shown to be significant at p < .02. Age was measured with a single scale item which requested the birthdates of the participant. The role model was measured by a single scale item which asked the highest level of education achieved by the student’s role model. Encouragement was measured through a single scale item which asked the level of encouragement the student received from the faculty. The reliability for this measure range from .88 to .91 (Moorman, 1991; Pillai, Schreisheim & Williams, 1999; Shore, Newton & Thorntom, 1990).

The dependent variable was measured by asking the respondents to give a percentage chance that they would complete their degree. This was a single scale open-ended item on the measure.

The survey was modified to reflect the fact this was being done within a college environment instead of an organization. Specifically the words “job” was replaced with “coursework” for several of the scale items. A copy of the instrument to be used is included in Appendix 1.

In addition, demographics were assessed to be used as controls in the analysis. These included marital status, current employment status and gender. These were chosen as they would have an impact on the daily lives of the students and therefore it is assumed they would affect the motivation of a student to continue in a program.

Procedure

The survey was mailed to the entire population of Weekend College (93) students. In order to assure the highest possible response rate the suggested administration process of Salant and Dillman (1994) was utilized.

First Mail out: A short advance notice was sent to all members of the sample.

Second Mail out: The actual mail survey was distributed about one week after the advance notice letter.

Third Mail out: A postcard follow-up was sent to all members of the sample four to eight days after the initial questionnaire.

Fourth Mail out: A personalized letter with a handwritten signature, questionnaire, and preaddressed return envelope with postage. This was sent to all non-respondents (Salant & Dillman).

A total of 52 surveys were returned. Two of these surveys were incomplete and only the first page was completed so these were discarded. Finally 50 surveys were considered to be appropriate for use in this study. Considering this research was being conducted during the summer semester and the surveys had to be sent via mail this was a good response rate.

The demographic characteristics of the final sample ranged in age from 22 years old to 68 years old. There were 38 females in the sample and 12 males. 34 of the respondents were married and 16 of the respondents were single. 46 of the respondents reported that they were working full time and 4 of the respondents were not currently employed.

Results

Analysis

Before the data could be analyzed all negatively worded scale items were reversed in accordance with the instructions on the original measure (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951). The specific scale items which were reversed are 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16 and 18. According to Pallant (2005) this is done to prevent response bias.

The next step in the process was to calculate a total scale score for independent variable interest in
coursework. This variable was tested with the 18 items on the Brayfield and Rothe (1951) measure. These 18 items were added together with the aid of SPSS and transformed into the independent variable of interest in coursework.

Two methods were utilized to understand the available data. First descriptive statistics were done with the aid of SPSS. As noted in Table 1 the age range of the participants was 22 to 68 years of age with a mean age of 45 and a standard deviation of 10.41. The participants reported their role models ranged from 0 (high school degree) to 3 (doctoral degree) with a mean of 1.34 and a standard deviation of .89. In addition the range on encouragement from a faculty member went from 0 to 5 with a mean of 2.96 and a standard deviation of 1.00.

Second a multiple regression analysis was performed to examine how well age, role models, encouragement and interest in coursework could predict a student’s intention to complete a higher education program. The coefficients of the regression model are shown in Table 2.

Here the control variables only account for 1% of the variance for intention to continue ($R^2 = .019$) in the regression model; while model 2 (predictor variables) account for 30% of the variance for intention to continue ($R^2 = .300$).

The $R^2$ change demonstrates that in Model 1 (control variables) accounts for only 2% of the variance in the intention to continue. In Model 2 (predictor variables) account for 28% change in the variance on the intention to continue. This is a statistically significant contribution (.006). This significance is noted again in the ANOVA table where the model as a whole is $F(7, 42) = 2.573, p < .027$.

To determine which of the independent variables contributed to the equation the Coefficient table was analyzed. Here only one of the variables was statistically significant age ($\beta = .321, p < .04$). The other independent variables were shown to be nonsignificant. Also none of the control variables were shown to have any significance.

The Pearson correlation analyses reflects statistically significant relationships between the intention to continue and age ($r = .441, p < .001$) encouragement ($r = -.270, p < .03$) and interest in coursework ($r = .306, p < .02$). A nonsignificant relationship was shown with role model.

The excluded variables from Model 1 (controls) demonstrate a statistically significant contribution to the production of intention to continue and age ($\beta = .460, p < .002$) and interest in coursework ($\beta = .306, p < .04$). In this test the independent variables of role model and encouragement showed a nonsignificant relationship.

**Discussion**

**Conclusions**

Only part of the hypothesis could be supported through this study. There was clear support for the independent variables of interest in coursework and age throughout the regression analysis. The finding regarding interest in coursework was in line with the research of Young (2004). Age was a new independent variable but, the findings were in line with expectations. The students were generally in the same age range (mean = 44) and therefore were adults who were serious about pursuing an education.

There was partial support for the independent variable of encouragement. It was interesting to note the negative Pearson value for encouragement and still significance. In conversations with my professor we speculated that students who are successful in their coursework probably do not need encouragement from their professors and therefore do not seek it out. Those who are not as successful in their coursework are going to be in need of a great deal more attention from faculty. Therefore the negative correlation was noted.

There was no support for the independent variables of role model. Perhaps the way in which this variable was measured could be adjusted for future research. The inference can be made that the students did not need a role model in order to be motivated in their educational pursuits.
**Limitations**

A major limitation to this study was the time of year. During the summer the students in the Weekend College program are not in classes and therefore the only way to contact them was via the mail. The return could have been improved if the surveys could have been distributed and collected while they were in class.

The sample size for this study was not sufficient as there were only 50 samples for four independent variables. A sample of 60 would have been a more appropriate number for multiple regression analysis.

Another limitation to this study was the decision to change the independent variable of competition (Young, 2004) to age for this study.

Finally, there are additional control variables which should have been assessed. For example, whether or not the participants had children or the distance they must travel to attend school might affect their ability to be successful in college.

**Implications for Future Research**

The relationship between encouragement and the intention to continue produced interesting results through this study and therefore certainly lends itself to future research. The lack of consistency in the results of this study was confusing and in particular the negative Pearson correlation value of -.270 which was shown to be significant at .029.

**References**

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**Table 1**
## Descriptive Statistics for All Variables

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
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<td>68</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>DV</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>86.40</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>1.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intcrswrk</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>8.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.47</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.27</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting the effect of Motivation on the Students Intention to Stay in Higher Education (N = 50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>SE b</td>
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<td>.05</td>
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<td>4.24</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.32*</td>
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<td>-.16</td>
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<td>-.27</td>
<td>Intcrswrk</td>
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<td>.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .05, standardized regression coefficients (β) are presented
Appendix 1

Instrument

Definition of the Independent Variables:

1. Nature of Work – This is defined as the positive (the kind of work that people would like to do) and the negative (the kind of work that people would prefer not to do) aspects of coursework.

2. Interest – The level of interest in the course work

3. Role Models – Does the student have any role models they are attempting to model themselves after

4. Encouragement – What sort of encouragement is the student receiving during their studies. Either from faculty, other students, family or friends.

Description: This measure, developed by Brayfield and Rothe (1951), uses 18 items to describe overall job satisfaction. The items form a one-dimensional measure of overall job satisfaction.

Measure: Responses are obtained using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree.

1. My education is like a hobby to me.
2. My education is usually interesting enough to keep me from getting bored.
3. It seems that my friends are very interested in their educations.
4. I consider my education rather unpleasant.
5. I enjoy my education more than my leisure time.
6. I am often bored with my education.
7. I feel fairly well satisfied with my present school
8. Most of the time I have to force myself to go to class.
9. I am satisfied with my school for the time being.
10. I feel that my school is no more interesting than others I could attend.
11. I definitely dislike my school work.
12. I feel that I am happier in my school work than most other people.
13. Most days I am enthusiastic about my education.
14. Each day of school seems like it will never end.
15. I like my school better than the average student does.
16. My school is pretty uninteresting.
17. I find real enjoyment in my education.
18. I am disappointed that I ever attended this school.

Open – Ended Questions

19. What is your date of birth?
20. Think of a role model you might have. What is the highest educational level obtained by that person?
21. What is the likelihood that you will stay in the program until you obtain a degree? Please give a percentage________________.