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The Impact of Working on Campus on the Academic Persistence of Freshmen

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This longitudinal study of 3,578 matriculating freshmen at a mid-sized public doctoral university in the Midwest found that students working on campus academically persisted at higher rates from fall to spring of their first year, and year to year thereafter. Also, students who worked on campus during their first semester in college graduated within six years at higher rates than those who did not.

With a large number of students leaving college after their first year, it is important to recognize, understand, and then foster those factors that enhance student persistence. Tinto (1993) said, "more students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay" (p. 1). Moreover, he estimated that of the almost 2.4 million students who entered higher education for the first time in 1993, over 1.1 million would never complete a two- or a four-year degree program. Among the factors that influence completion of a degree program, financing higher education is one of the important components. The purpose of this study was to examine matriculating freshmen who worked on campus at a mid-sized public doctoral Midwestern university during the fall semester of 1991 to see if they persisted at greater rates than similar students who did not. It also sought to determine if students who worked on campus graduated at higher rates than students who did not.

Students work while in college for a variety of reasons, such as to pay their tuition, to have extra spending money, and to buy necessary supplies. The rationale of working to earn money is a readily acceptable one; working on campus provides students with a convenient way to earn needed money. However, an added benefit of working on campus is the feeling of belonging within the university, which may provide an additional connection to the campus.

Several authors have looked at the value of students working while enrolled in college. Gleason (1993) found a negative relationship between grades and the number of hours worked per week; a positive relationship between employment and dropping out of college; and a positive relationship between employment in college and success in the post-college labor market. Stampen, Reeves, and Hansen (1988) studied the impact of student earnings in offsetting "unmet need." They found that "aid recipients who work while attending college are in many cases

able to offset if not exceed unmet need, while those who do not, or cannot work, are at a relative financial disadvantage" (p. 113). Broughton and Otto (1999) examined learning outcomes that occurred as a result of on-campus working. Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (1998) examined the impact of working on the cognitive development of college students. Furr and Elling (2000) found that students who worked more than 30 hours were less involved with campus activities, had fewer interactions with faculty, and were more likely to state that working had negatively affected their own academic performance. However, little has been written to tie on-campus employment to students' sense of belonging and their persistence in college. From a student developmental theory perspective, Coomes (1992) argued that student employment as a function of financial aid offered "many opportunities to foster [student] development" (p. 28).

Researchers disagree somewhat on the effect working while in college has on persistence. In the realm of off-campus employment, many authors agree that employment off-campus has a negative influence on both year-to-year persistence in college and completion of a baccalaureate degree (e.g., Anderson, 1981; Astin, 1975a, 1982; Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987; Kohen, Nestel, & Karmas, 1978; Peng & Fetters, 1978; Staman, 1980). This negative influence remained when background characteristics such as academic ability, high school achievement, gender, ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, and educational aspirations were taken into account. Part-time off-campus work (25 hours per week or less) showed some negative influences. Moreover, when off-campus employment increased to full-time (35 to 40 hours per week), the negative impact was more substantial (Astin, 1975b). The rationale was that when students leave campus to work, the level of student involvement and integration in the institution decreases (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

However, on-campus student employment seems to have the opposite impact on persistence and educational attainment. Part-time employment on campus has been found to positively influence both persistence and degree completion, controlling for factors such as academic aptitude, educational aspirations, high school achievement, and family socioeconomic status (Anderson, 1981; Astin, 1975b, 1982; Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Velez, 1985). In their study of the impact of working in college on first semester grade point averages, credit hours earned, and second semester retention, Curtis and Nimmer (1991) found no significant differences "between students employed through the Federal Work-Study program, those with regular student employment positions, and those not employed on campus" (p. 16).

In a study of 41,000 students nationwide, Astin (1975a) found that "part-time work facilitates student persistence"

Part-time employment on campus has been found to positively influence both persistence and degree completion.

(p. 79). He also reported a 10–15 percent decrease in the drop-out probability of students who worked part-time. Moreover, on-campus work was preferable to off-campus work in terms of student retention; however, the type and campus location of employment were not related to retention (Astin, 1975a). The majority of research indicated that on-campus employment does not hinder academic achievement and, in some studies, it has been associated with higher academic performance (Wilkie & Jones, 1994). Working on campus provides an important connection to the campus and fosters a sense of community that has been shown to improve persistence.

Students either become integrated into the institution or fail to become integrated based primarily on experiences that involve interactions with faculty, staff, and other students.

It is important to know the reasons students leave college. Tinto's (1993) model of student departure focused on the argument that voluntary withdrawal from college is a longitudinal process of interactions between the student and the academic and social systems of the college. He stated that individuals enter college with varying backgrounds that contribute to the students' intentions, goals, and commitments to the institution. However, once at college, experiences occur within its academic and social systems that encourage or discourage integration into the campus community. Students either become integrated into the institution or fail to become integrated based primarily on experiences that involve interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. Positive experiences strengthen a student's goals and institutional commitment, while a negative experience or set of experiences can serve to weaken those goals and level of commitment. Those who fail to become integrated are more likely to withdraw.

Student departure can take two forms: academic dismissal (involuntary withdrawal) or voluntary withdrawal. Tinto (1993) found that nationally less than 25 percent of all institutional departures took the form of academic dismissals. He reported "most departures are voluntary in the sense that they occur without any formal compulsion on the part of the institution" (p. 49).

Students' decisions to leave an institution voluntarily occur at two levels: individual and institutional. On an individual level, students leave an institution for two primary reasons: lack of commitment to the institution and lack of intent to complete a degree (Tinto, 1993). The basis of these two reasons for leaving is established before a student arrives on campus. On an institutional level, Tinto stated that there are four forms of individual experience that affect departure: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. These describe "important interactional outcomes arising from individual experiences within the institution" (p. 37).

Astin, Korn, and Green (1987) studied students who withdrew from college and concluded that

... although students generally report high levels of satisfaction with their college experience...there is much that

colleges and universities can do to enhance learning opportunities...to provide more and better assistance in a range of nonclassroom (but not necessarily nonacademic) services, and to retain students (p. 42).

Astin's (1984) "Involvement Theory" posits that students who are more actively involved in their college experience achieve higher grades, are more satisfied, and have higher persistence rates than students who are less actively involved. Tinto (1975) and Astin (1977, 1984) both cite involvement as a key factor in student success, satisfaction, and retention. Institutions can work in a variety of ways to strengthen students' commitment and intention, foster adjustment, reduce difficulty, and develop their sense of belonging. It is important for students to feel a link, or connection, to their university outside of the classroom. For many college students, on-campus student employment can provide such a connection. Whether to earn money or gain experience, many students secure part-time or full-time jobs, both on and off campus.

For student employment to play a role in student persistence, the entire institution must be "on board" with the plan. Tinto (1990) offered three principles for effective retention efforts: (1) the principle of community, (2) an institutional commitment to students, and (3) a commitment to education. Ultimately the underlying similarity of successful, productive retention programs is the way the institutions "think about retention, the sorts of emphasis they give their retention efforts, and the ends to which they direct their energies" (p. 35).

On-campus student employment plays a role in supporting these three principles. It enhances involvement and integration into the campus community while off-campus student employment tends to inhibit it (Wenc, 1983; Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987). An important component of the principle of community is that successful institutions "consciously reach out and make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and between students, faculty, and staff members of the institution" (Tinto, 1990, p. 36). Campus employers are key players in being able to help build community and integrate students into the institution. On-campus student employment helps students to feel important and have a sense of belonging at a time of so many changes and new challenges (McKenzie, 1981).

Methodology

This project examined matriculating freshmen at a mid-sized public doctoral Midwestern university. The study sought to answer these research questions: Did matriculating freshman students who worked on campus during the fall semester of 1991 return to college for the spring semester of 1992 and subsequent fall semesters at a greater rate than matriculating freshmen who did not work on campus? Did matriculating freshman students who worked on campus during the fall semester of

1991 receive an undergraduate degree at a greater rate than matriculating freshmen who did not work on campus?

The population of 3,578 students used for this study was defined as freshmen matriculating in the fall semester of 1991. The sample equaled the population. The sample was divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 477 freshman matriculants who worked on campus during the fall semester of 1991. The second group consisted of 3,101 matriculants who did not work on campus during the fall semester of 1991. Note that for purposes of this study, students who did not work on campus are referred to as "non-workers"; these students may or may not have been employed off campus, however.

Data were collected from university databases on several variables for each subject. The variables were in three categories: personal information, persistence, and employment status.

Findings

Student Profile

The freshman class of 1991 consisted of 1,495 men and 2,083 women—42 percent and 58 percent, respectively. Of those who worked on campus, about 65 percent were women and 35 percent were men. Caucasian students made up roughly 91 percent of the class, and about 5 percent were African American. Nearly 91 percent of the on-campus workers were Caucasian. Eighty-nine percent of the matriculating class resided in-state. Of those who worked on campus, about 92 percent were from in-state. Nearly 73 percent of the matriculating class lived on campus, while 77 percent of on-campus workers lived on campus.

Persistence Rates

Second Semester—Spring 1992 Rates. The overall persistence rate to spring semester for the fall matriculants was about 91 percent. Nearly 93 percent of those working on campus returned for the spring semester of 1992 while almost 91 percent of non-workers returned (Table 1).

Year Two—Fall 1992 Rates. Freshman matriculants of 1991 returned for a second year of study at an overall rate of about 77 percent. Students who worked on campus returned for the following fall semester at a rate of 78 percent, while non-workers returned at a rate of roughly 77 percent.

Year Three—Fall 1993 Rates. Nearly two thirds of the freshman matriculants of 1991 returned for the fall semester of 1993. Of those who had worked on campus as first semester freshmen, about 67 percent returned for their third year. Nearly 66 percent of the non-workers returned in the fall of 1993.

TABLE 1
Student Persistence Rates, by Employment Status

	On-campus Workers		Non-workers (not employed on campus)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Spring 1992, second semester	442	92.7	2818	90.9	3260	91.1
Fall 1992, year 2	372	78.0	2396	77.3	2768	77.4
Fall 1993, year 3	318	67.2	2034	65.7	2352	65.9
Fall 1994, year 4	287	61.6	1842	59.9	2129	60.1
Fall 1995, year 5	148	42.9	1048	44.0	1196	43.9
Fall 1996, year 6	45	18.4	302	17.9	347	17.9

Year Four—Fall 1994 Rates. The persistence rate to the fall semester of 1994 for the matriculating class of 1991 was approximately 60 percent. Nearly 62 percent of workers returned in the fall of 1994 while about 60 percent of non-workers returned for their fourth year.

Year Five—Fall 1995 Rates. Nearly 44 percent of the 1991 freshman matriculants who had not yet earned a degree returned for a fifth year of study. Of those freshmen matriculating in the fall of 1991 who had not yet earned a degree, nearly 43 percent of those who worked on campus returned for a fifth year with 44 percent of non-workers returning in the fall of 1995.

Year Six—Fall 1996 Rates. Nearly 18 percent of the subjects who had not yet earned a degree returned for a sixth year. Those who had worked on campus during the fall semester of 1991 returned at a rate of about 18 percent, while slightly less than 18 percent of the non-workers returned.

Graduation Rates

More on-campus workers graduated by July 1997 than non-workers. Of those who worked, 56 percent received a degree. Non-workers graduated at a rate of 53 percent (Table 2). Overall, about 53 percent of freshmen who matriculated in the fall semester of 1991 earned either an associate's or baccalaureate degree by the conclusion of the summer semester of 1997.

Conclusions, Implications, and Further Research

In this study, students who worked on campus as matriculating freshmen persisted at slightly higher rates from fall to spring of their first year, and year to year thereafter. However, because the percentage point differences between persistence and graduation rates for workers and non-workers is small, and the rates do not account for differences in students' academic majors,

TABLE 2
Graduation Rates as of Spring 1997, by Employment Status

	Earned a Degree		Did Not Earn a Degree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
On-campus workers	267	56.0	210	44.0	477	13.3
Non-workers (not employed on campus)	1644	53.0	1457	47.0	3101	86.7
All students	1911	53.4	1667	46.6	3578	100.0

ages, and other factors that might affect persistence, it cannot be concluded that working on campus had a statistically significant effect on persistence or graduation rates at this Midwestern university. Working on campus does not appear to adversely affect students' progress toward a degree, but it may not increase degree attainment rates, either.

Working on campus did not reduce students' persistence to graduation. In fact, students who worked on campus graduated at a slightly higher rate than non-workers or the class as a whole. This information can be used by university departments at this institution to promote on-campus employment opportunities and by financial aid offices that include Federal Work Study as part of the financial aid package. Working on campus may provide additional integration into the campus community at this institution, which in the long run might increase students' likelihood for success.

As higher education moves into the 21st century, college and university faculty and administrators face a myriad of challenges and issues, including student persistence and enhancing student development and learning. Promoting on-campus work opportunities to students might be one way to enhance student development, assist students in funding their education, help students develop work-related skills, build a sense of community, and foster student persistence.

If this study were replicated, it may be helpful to include a statistical model that might account for other variables that influence persistence, along with the proportion of freshmen who worked on campus during the second semester of their first year as well as those who worked on campus during the first semester. Using these additional variables to examine the impact of on-campus work during upperclassman years may also be an interesting subject of further evaluation.

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