

A Comparison of Retention Rates Among America's 2-Year Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

The problem of this study was to determine the extent to which 2-year public, proprietary, and independent institutions in the United States are able to retain first-time, first-year students from one fall semester to the next. The study sought to determine if differences in retention rates existed between and among 2-year public, proprietary, and independent institutions.

The study indicated that first-time, full-time students were more easily retained in private 2-year institutions, whether proprietary or independent, than were first-time, full-time students in public institutions. Full-time students had higher retention rates in all sectors of 2-year institutions than did part-time students.

Since colonial times, higher education has played a significant role in American history. The first institution of higher learning, Harvard University, opened as a private college in 1636. As higher education developed in America, the battle raged between educational leaders as to the direction that higher education should take. The German research model was prevalent (Nieli, 2007). As the system evolved, displeasure arose among university faculty who did not want to teach lower division courses, preferring the more rigorous, advanced courses within their disciplines.

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the first 2-year institutions were established to teach the lower division courses (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Like the trail-blazing universities before them, these institutions were private. The private, nonprofit junior college dates back to 1851 to Lasell Female Academy. Lasell Female Academy was a liberal arts college whose mission was to make the first two years of a degree more accessible to the population. Approximately 34% of the 2-year private colleges still in existence today were founded between 1890 and 1945 (Williams & Colby, 1991). The 2-year for-profit or proprietary institution dates back to the same time period, about 1870 (Kinser, 2006). However, with the advent of the public community college at the turn of the twentieth century, the role of the 2-year college began to weave itself into the fabric of higher education in America.

These institutions, both public and private, nonprofit and proprietary, have evolved into much more than the first two years of a 4-year degree. Two-year colleges are typically open admission institutions, offering transfer credit, vocational education, and contract education for local employers, remediation, and even community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Their students are as diverse as America herself. No longer are the doors of higher education open only to the elite of society. These schools are the embodiment of democracy as they are the vehicle by which much of society betters itself whether for self-improvement, life-long learning, or career enhancement. Recent estimates indicate that 2-year institutions enroll approximately half of all American undergraduates (Roman, 2007). While 2-year colleges have made great strides in providing access to higher education, access alone is not enough. Without persistence toward educational goals, student success may not be achieved.

Purpose of the Study

The focus of this study was on the retention rates of 2-year institutions of higher learning in the United States and included public, proprietary, and independent colleges. The purpose of the study was first to calculate the full-time and part-time retention rates for each category of 2-year institution and to examine the differences, if they existed, between and among the three types of colleges. Secondly, the study explored the differences in the full-time and part-time retention rates of first-time students within each category of 2-year institutions.

Overview

In 2006, the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, appointed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education Margaret Spellings, reported the findings of a yearlong study of the effectiveness of postsecondary education in the United States

in *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. The Commission noted some troubling signs of the ineffectiveness and even obsolescence of institutions of higher learning. As a result of notable events such as the First Morrill Act in 1862, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, and the extraordinary growth of the community colleges in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States far exceeded the rest of the world in educational attainment during the twentieth century. However, the Commission reported that in 2006 the United States had fallen to 12th among industrialized nations in educational attainment, with a half a dozen countries close on her heels (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The Spelling's Commission proposed four areas of concern in which recommended adjustments could reasonably improve the effectiveness of postsecondary education. These areas include access, affordability, quality, and accountability. In some way, each of these target areas affects the retention of students as they persist toward the attainment of their educational goals. Although access typically conjures thoughts of availability, the underprepared student also has limited access to a postsecondary education. Students with inadequate preparation must enroll in remedial classes. The Commission reported that approximately 40% of all entering college freshmen are required to enroll in at least one preparatory class. The percentage may be approximately 20 to 25 points higher for those freshmen in 2-year institutions. Students who begin their college careers in non-credit, preparatory courses persist to graduation at much lower rates than those who are college ready upon matriculation (Hoyt, 1999). To some degree, these surprisingly high percentages of students requiring remediation may be explained by the larger numbers of students pursuing postsecondary education; however, Sanoff (2006) reported that 44% of college faculty members said that students are not well-prepared for college-level writing, while 90% of high school teachers thought that high school graduates were prepared. Disparity existed in the perception of the level of skills necessary to perform at a collegiate level. The Commission proposed closing the "expectation gap" between high school and college (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The rising costs of higher education are of concern to students, parents, college administrators, and the general public. Affordability directly affects the retention of all students, but students in 2-year institutions are particularly vulnerable to the economic throws of higher education due to their varying stages and stations in life. Frequently, students must interrupt their studies in order to work and save the funds necessary to return to school. Graduation is postponed, sometimes inevitably. The Spelling's Commission proposed a restructuring of the financial aid system. The restructuring included an increase in need-based funding. The Commission projected that an increase in financial aid would result in, among other things, "increased retention, or graduation by, students who might not have been able to complete college due to cost" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 19).

Statement of the Problem

The effectiveness of an institution of higher education is measured in part by the ability of that institution to retain students from semester to semester and year to year until a program is completed (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). From a fiscal standpoint, Wild and Ebbers (2002) reported that the cost of retaining a student is considerably less than the cost of recruiting a student. Academically, persistence in collegiate studies is paramount if the student is to realize his or her

educational goals. A review of the literature indicates that studies regarding retention rates of 4-year institutions are abundant; however, only recently has research begun that focuses on the 2-year institution. Students enter these institutions with a variety of educational goals and tend to leave and return sporadically as their educational needs change and as their finances allow (Derby & Smith, 2004). The problem of this study was to examine the extent to which 2-year public, independent, and proprietary institutions are able to retain first-time students from one fall semester to the next. Furthermore, the study sought to determine if differences in retention rates existed between and among 2-year public, proprietary, and independent institutions.

Research Questions

The following research questions formed the basis for the study:

1. What percentage of full-time and part-time, first-time students in a 2-year public, proprietary, or independent colleges return to the same institution from one fall to the next?
2. Do differences exist in retention rates for full-time and part-time, first-time students between and among 2-year public, proprietary, and independent institutions?

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

No differences exist in the retention rates of full-time and part-time, first-time students between or among 2-year public, proprietary, and independent institutions.

Significance of the Study

In a day in which institutions of higher learning are called to accountability, one measure of the success of an institution is the persistence of students in attaining their educational goals. In *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, the Commission, appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), pointed to retention as a measure of institutional effectiveness. For the 2-year institution, this concept bears further investigation. The term retention in and of itself requires clarification. In the traditional university context, retention is generally thought of as “on-time graduation (within four to five years)” (Walleri, 1981, p. 3). Superimposing this definition onto the 2-year institution implies graduation within two to three years.

The task of defining student retention in the truly American 2-year institutional environment is not as simple as tracking graduation rates (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). The educational goals of students within the 2-year school, whether public or private, vary widely, encapsulating a smorgasbord of personal objectives. Many traditional students are pursuing academic transfer courses. Even within these ranks student goals vary. Some students desire to

attain an associate degree while others seek to complete basic courses at a reduced cost and in smaller classes before transferring into typical 4-year baccalaureate programs. A growing number of students seek a vocational degree or perhaps vocational courses to enrich an already established career.

With the cost of higher education increasing sharply, the effect of student attrition on collegiate finance is a matter of great concern. A study of Mountain Empire Community College indicated that a 10% reduction in student attrition saved the institution almost \$95,000 in annual cost (Sydow & Sandel, 1998). In a case study of Bronx Community College, Ritze (2006) suggested that effective enrollment management addresses the community college's financial dependence upon student enrollment issues such as retention. Although an institution will incur certain expenses in order to retain students, Wild and Ebbers (2002) recommended a cost analysis to determine the point at which the institution would realize the financial benefit of retaining students as opposed to recruiting students to replace those who dropped out. Wild and Ebbers contended that the cost of retention would be less than the cost of recruiting and would, therefore, not change the overall cost factor used to determine tuition costs. Additionally, in some states, retention rates serve as a benchmark for state funding (Derby & Smith, 2004). As the cost of higher education rises, the concern over state funding escalates.

A search of available literature revealed extensive research into the retention of students in 4-year institutions and, recently, a significant amount of research in community colleges. However, the research is primarily focused on public institutions. This study utilizes three categories of 2-year institutions – public, independent, and proprietary. These classifications are based upon the IPEDS classifications of public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit, respectively. Public and independent institutions share the status of nonprofit. Nonprofit colleges often pride themselves in their missions to serve the common good rather than their bottom lines. The private for-profit institutions are commonly known as proprietary schools. They are private in that they are not supported by tax dollars, but, like their nonprofit, private counterparts, may receive financial aid for their students. Typically, the curriculum of the for-profit institution is very narrowly focused, lacking the breadth of the traditional nonprofit institution (Berg, 2005).

Berg (2005) indicated that proprietary schools are not new to the higher education arena but have come to the forefront of educational discussion in recent years, especially with the advent of online degrees and the focus on postsecondary vocational training. Approximately 10% of these schools are accredited by the same regional accrediting agencies that accredit the nonprofit schools, and they report to the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (Berg, 2005). However, research regarding student retention at proprietary institutions is apparently absent from the literature. Furthermore, no research was identified that compared the retention rates and practices of the three categories of 2-year institutions. The nonprofit institutions, both public and private, have been a part of the fabric of higher education for approximately 100 years, and, yet, research is not readily available to compare retention between these classifications. Perhaps one category of institution is outperforming the others in the area of student retention. Since a student's educational goals cannot be met and success cannot be achieved without persistence, research is necessary to compare the student retention rates at all three types of 2-year colleges and to determine if significant differences exist between and among the retention rates of public, independent, and proprietary institutions.

Method of Procedure

The study began with the collection of national data extracted from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which is maintained by the Department of Education. The IPEDS collection system provides a large data base from which patterns and relationships may be discovered. The techniques of data mining focus on such patterns and relationships (Friedman, 1997). Friedman indicated that although data mining and statistics are obviously related, most of the techniques of data mining have originated outside the realm of statistics and are somewhat questioned as to their relevance in academic research. The emergence of very large databases, such as IPEDS, combined with advances in computer technology produce an increased interest in the benefits of data mining in research. Friedman discussed several data mining techniques, one of which is clustering methods or data segmentation. According to Friedman, if statistics is to remain a relevant information science, statisticians “must foster a climate of innovation and change for meeting new data analytic challenges of the present and future” (1997, p. 6).

The data for this study were drawn from all 2-year degree-granting institutions that participate in the IPEDS collection process. The data collected were transferred to spreadsheets and coded by type of institution. The data included the 2009 universe of institutions and were limited to data from the 2008-2009 academic year, which was the most current, complete year of data available at the time of the study. Using the IPEDS data cutting tool, the study was delimited to degree-granting, 2-year institutions in the United States. The extraction was replicated three times for each type of institution: public, independent (private not-for-profit), and proprietary (private for-profit). The study provided retention rates for both full-time and part-time degree-seeking, first-year students.

The study conducted multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine differences between and among the various institutional retention rates by institutional classification. The statistical testing incorporated a 0.05 level of significance. Post hoc analysis was conducted where required. Appropriate tests were conducted to test assumptions of MANOVA. Specifically, the study employed the Box’s M test to examine the equality of covariance across groups and a Levine’s test to examine the variance within groups. A Wilks’ lambda was utilized to determine the overall significance of the MANOVA model, and the partial eta square provided the portion of variance explained by the independent variable. Power was determined to demonstrate the probability of correctly accepting the null hypothesis.

Research Question 1

The first research question asks: What percentage of full-time and first-time students in a 2-year public, proprietary, or independent colleges return to the same institution from one fall to the next? The retention rates for full-time and part-time students were extracted from the IPEDS database for each of the three sectors of 2-year institutions. Once extracted using the IPEDS Data Cutting Tool, the data were cleaned to include only those institutions that reported both full-time and part-time retention rates. The names of the institutions were removed and the data coded as to public, proprietary, or independent institution. Descriptive statistics for fulltime cohorts were calculated for each sector and are reported in Table 1. The data for public 2-year

institutions included 1,002 institutions. The mean retention rate for full-time, first-time students was 57.9%, with a standard deviation of 10.4 percentage points. The retention rates ranged from a minimum of 16% to a maximum of 100%. In the proprietary sector, 242 institutions reported a mean retention rate for first-time, full-time students as 63.2% with a standard deviation of 17.9 percentage points. The reported rates ranged from a low of 21% to a high of 100%. The sample of independent 2-year institutions was comprised of 52 schools. Retention rates ranged from 12% to 100%, with a mean of 62.2% and a standard deviation of 20.5 percentage points.

Table 1

Full-time Retention Rates

<u>Sector</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Public	1002	84	16	100	57.9	10.4
Proprietary	242	79	21	100	63.2	17.9
Independent	52	88	12	100	62.2	20.5

Retention rates for the first-time, part-time cohort of students for each of the three sectors are reported in Table 2. For the 1,002 public institutions included in the study, the mean retention rate for part-time students was 41.1% with a standard deviation of 13.8 percentage points. Actual retention rates ranged from a minimum of 0% to a maximum of 100%. The mean retention rate for the 242 proprietary institutions was 52.3% with a standard deviation of 27.7 percentage points. The range for proprietary schools was also 100 points with a low of 0% and a high of 100%. The 52 independent colleges included in the study reported retention rates for part-time, first-time students with a mean of 61.3% and a standard deviation of 28.5 percentage points. Once again, the actual rates ranged from 0% to 100% for these institutions.

Table 2

Part-time Retention Rates

<u>Sector</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Public	1002	100	0	100	41.1	13.7
Proprietary	242	100	0	100	52.3	27.7
Independent	52	100	0	100	61.3	28.5

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 examined differences in retention rates for full-time and part-time, first-time students between and among 2-year public, proprietary, and independent institutions. The hypothesis was tested at a significance of $\alpha < 0.05$ by performing MANOVA.

The assumptions of MANOVA regarding independence and level of measurement of the variables were satisfied. Linearity of the dependent variables was tested by calculating a Pearson Correlation Coefficient within each sector of public, independent, and proprietary institution. Table 3 reveals that in each case moderate correlation exists between the dependent variables. Moderate correlation satisfies the assumption of linearity while preserving the power of the MANOVA (Cole, Maxwell, Arvey, & Salas, 1994).

Table 3

Correlation of Dependent Variables

<u>Sector</u>	<u>Pearson Correlation Coefficient</u>
Public	0.450
Independent	0.515
Proprietary	0.408

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances tested the null hypothesis that error variances of dependent variables were equal across groups. At $p < 0.001$, Levene's Test found significant differences in the error variances across groups. Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices (Box M) determined that covariances were also significantly different at $p < 0.001$. Thus, the assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance was not met. Recall, however, that Bray and Maxwell (1985) found that MANOVA is extremely robust when this assumption is violated if sample sizes are large. The sample sizes for this study meet the expectations of Bray and Maxwell.

Normality of the dependent variables was tested with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality. The test failed to indicate normality in each instance, with $p < 0.001$ for both full-time and part-time retention rates. However, histograms of each dependent variable demonstrate that the data is approximately normal with the exception of outliers. Figures 1 and 2 are provided to establish the normality of the dependent variables full-time and part-time retention rates.

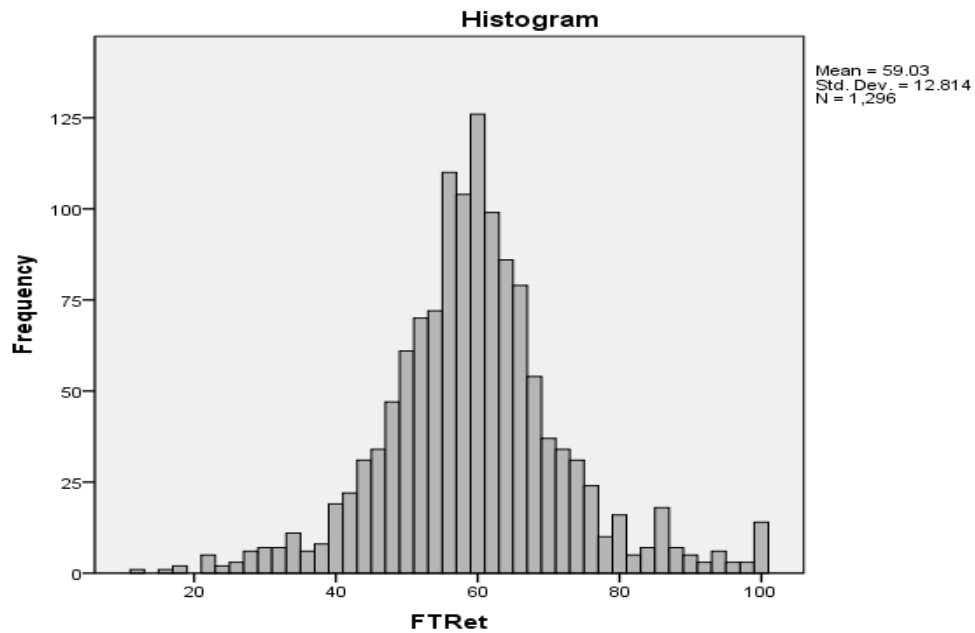
FTRet

Figure 1. Histogram of full-time retention rates.

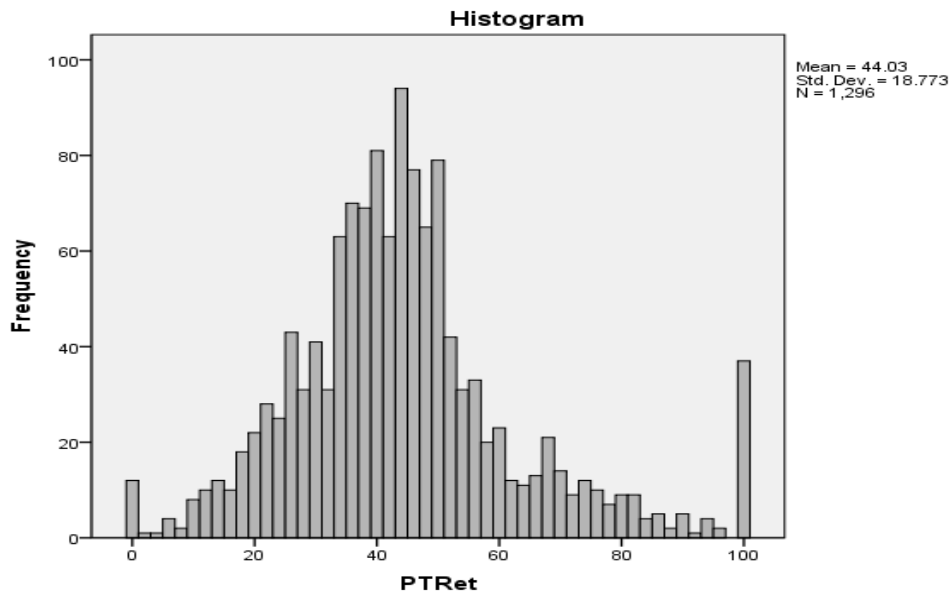
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Figure 2. Histogram of part-time retention rates.

Based on the MANOVA, significant difference was found to exist in the retention rates of full-time and part-time, first-time students in the three sectors of 2-year institutions as

indicated in Table 4. The research indicated a Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.906$, $F(4, 2584) = 32.571$, with a $p < 0.001$ leading to rejection of the null hypothesis that no differences exist. The multivariate partial $\eta^2 = 0.048$ indicated a small to medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). The Test of Between-Subjects Effects revealed that both full-time, $p < 0.001$, and part-time, $p < 0.001$, retention rates were significantly affected by the various sectors of public, independent, and proprietary. Of additional interest is the effect size as signified by the partial η^2 for each dependent variable. The dependent variable full-time retention rate provided a small to moderate effect size, partial $\eta^2 = 0.028$, while the dependent variable part-time retention rate provided a medium to large effect size, partial $\eta^2 = 0.089$.

Table 4

Results of MANOVA

<u>Dependent Variable</u>	<u>Significance</u>	<u>Partial Eta Squared</u>
Full-time Retention	0.000	0.028
Part-time Retention	0.000	0.089

* Significance of 0.000 indicates $p < 0.0005$

A Tukey post-hoc test was conducted to determine where actual differences occurred. Results are provided in Table 5. The post-hoc analysis indicated significant differences in full-time, first-time retention rates between public 2-year institutions and independent 2-year institutions, $p = 0.042$. Similarly, statistical significance was indicated between public and proprietary, $p < 0.001$. No significant difference was revealed between independent and proprietary institutions for full-time, first-time retention rates. All combinations of part-time, first-time retention rates were found to be significant. The comparison of retention rates between public institutions and either independent or proprietary were found to be significant at $p < 0.001$, while the comparison of independent and proprietary was significant at $p = 0.003$.

Table 5

Results of Tukey Post-Hoc Tests

<u>Dependent Variable</u>	<u>Sector</u>	<u>Sector</u>	<u>Significance</u>
Full-time Ret.	Public	Independent	0.042
		Proprietary	0.000
	Independent	Public	0.042
		Proprietary	0.877
	Proprietary	Public	0.000
		Independent	0.877
Part-time Ret.	Public	Independent	0.000
		Proprietary	0.000
	Independent	Public	0.000
		Proprietary	0.003
	Proprietary	Public	0.000
		Independent	0.003

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level. A significance of 0.000 indicates $p < 0.0005$.

Discussion of Findings

The MANOVA indicated statistical differences between the full-time retention rates of public 2-year institutions and both sectors of private institutions. However, no statistical differences existed between the full-time retention rates of proprietary and independent institutions. The MANOVA calculated a mean full-time retention rate for 2-year proprietary institutions at 63.2% and 2-year independent institutions at 62.2% followed by public institutions at 57.9%. None of the administrators of 2-year institutions interviewed were surprised by these results. As different as the proprietary and independent institutions are, the similarities that positively affect retention rates prompt a worthwhile discussion. Both sectors of private 2-year institutions exhibit two characteristics similar to those proposed by Scott, Bailey, and Kienzl

(2006) as traits of 4-year, private institutions that positively affect graduation rates. These characteristics include both small size and selectivity.

As noted in the study completed by JBL Associates (2010), most 2-year proprietary institutions are small, as are most 2-year independent institutions. The administrators interviewed for this study perceived that the small size of the private institutions contributed to their successes in regard to the retention of students. The smallness of these institutions in and of itself is not the key to their successes, but the small size contributes to an environment in which student retention and success is cultivated. Two aspects of this environment are faculty access and the nurturing of faculty and staff.

As Tinto (2006) admonished, faculty involvement with students, both inside and outside of the classroom, is vital to the persistence of students. The smaller, more intimate setting of the private institution lends itself to greater access to instructors, whose primary role is to teach; however, both private institutions included in the study also involve faculty directly in student advising. The smaller environment allows faculty members to know their students by name, as demonstrated by the administrators interviewed. The environment is one of mentoring, reminiscent of the very early days of higher education in which a great teacher took only a few students and taught them individually.

Tinto (2006) advocated faculty development in the area of pedagogy. He explained that faculty performance in the classroom is critical to the success of students. Since postsecondary instructors are educated in their respective disciplines and do not necessarily have a background in pedagogy, Tinto suggested that such training may increase the effectiveness of instruction. The academic dean at the proprietary institution in this study has implemented such training for new faculty. His program is highly successful and reports a retention rate that is considerably higher than the mean for all proprietary institutions included in Chapter 4 of this study.

Students in 2-year institutions tend to bring with them more concerns than students in a typical 4-year, residential institution (Roman, 2007). The small size of the private 2-year college fosters awareness of the needs of students beyond the classroom. Childcare, transportation, and flexible hours for classes and tutorials are among the needs of many of these students. The highly successful proprietary institution included in this study has addressed these needs through its CARE program. The public school administrator indicated that many services are available to students in the larger, public institutions; however, students seem not to know where to access them. Perhaps the small environment of the private institutions facilitates the recognition of individual student needs and the direction of the individual to available assistance.

The typical 2-year institution, whether public, independent, or proprietary, would classify itself as open admission academically. However, the interviews revealed that both the independent and the proprietary institution practice a measure of selectivity. Independent institutions are primarily faith-based institutions. Students who seek admission to these institutions come with certain expectations of a faith-based educational experience. Prior to matriculation, students who choose an independent institution typically have considered the spiritual fit of the institution for their needs. Morris, Beck, and Smith (2006) determined that this spiritual fit positively affects retention at private, faith-based institutions. The proprietary institution also practices a type of selectivity in the interview process required prior to admission. Students are admitted to a program based upon their ability to successfully complete the program. A student is denied admission or is redirected to an alternate program based upon the admission officer's perception of his or her ability to be successful. The open admission policy

practiced by the 2-year public institution does not permit even the minimal level of selectivity built into the admissions processes of the private institutions.

Two notable differences exist between the proprietary institution and both the public and independent colleges. Both differences surfaced during the interviews. The lack of student preparedness for collegiate level coursework has been identified repeatedly throughout the literature as detrimental to student retention and successful completion of educational goals. Academically, student preparedness is most often synonymous with readiness to perform at the college level in mathematics and English. Both public and independent 2-year institutions remediate students in these disciplines by enrolling them in developmental courses designed to bolster skills in these areas. All too often, students never achieve the desired level of competence to move forward into credit-level courses and become a part of the attrition rates of these institutions. The proprietary institution included in this study does not offer developmental courses. Instead, remediation is embedded in the required coursework for the program in which the student is enrolled. Although courses of study are different in proprietary schools than in the more traditional liberal arts institutions, perhaps a lesson may be learned in regard to the treatment of developmental studies. The public institution in this study is currently implementing a modular style program of developmental education that will allow the student more flexibility in scheduling of developmental studies. The independent institution has not yet implemented such a program but is researching the possibility for the ensuing academic year. Perhaps this innovative approach to a primary cause for attrition in 2-year institutions will increase student persistence and academic success.

The second clear distinction between the proprietary programs and the liberal arts programs is the focus of the student. Without exception the participants in this study referenced focus of the student as key to the successful retention of that student. The proprietary student is obviously focused on a career path. Those students in proprietary institutions who lose that focus become a part of the attrition rate of the institution. The public and independent institutions cite the lack of student focus as a primary cause for student attrition at their respective institutions. The lack of student focus dominated the responses of the director of enrollment management at the public college. Although the programs of the public and independent institutions do not lend themselves as well to the concentrated focus of the proprietary programs, the public college administrator pointed to the need for students to matriculate with some measure of direction in order to be most successful. Obviously, a student must have some educational goal in order to achieve it.

The discussion of part-time retention rates was far less productive than that of full-time rates. The MANOVA indicated significant differences between the part-time retention rates of each sector of 2-year institution. The independent colleges posted the highest part-time retention rate at a mean of 61.3%, followed by the proprietary schools with 52.3% and the public institutions with 41.1%. The mean part-time retention rate of each sector was lower than its respective full-time retention rate; however, the part-time rate for the independent colleges was only slightly lower than its full-time mean rate of 62.2%. In each sector the range of part-time retention rates was 0% to 100% and standard deviations were larger than for full-time rates, indicating that the spread of the data was greater for part-time rates and less clustered around the means. A 0% retention rate would indicate that an institution either has no part-time cohort or has so few first-time, part-time students that information gleaned regarding the retention and attrition of these students may not be representative of the sector of institutions. The director of

enrollment management for a large public 2-year institution very honestly admitted that she could not offer adequate answers as to the reasons for part-time student attrition. She simply stated that they “are all over the place” and added that part-time students seem to drop in and drop out almost on a whim. The academic dean of the proprietary institution, which reports a 72% retention rate of full-time, first-time students and a 0% retention rate of part-time, first-time students does not have adequate numbers of part-time students to offer meaningful responses to the questions regarding part-time students. The programs of this institution are not geared toward part-time enrollment. The dean of students at the independent college proposed that part-time students are typically non-traditional students who are in need of the nurturing and individual attention provided by the smaller independent institution. Many of these students are returning to school after an absence of several years and are particularly in need of the academic advising and tutorial services available to them on most campuses, but the smaller, more intimate environment of the independent institution may encourage these students to seek out the assistance they need to be successful.

Recommendations for Further Study

The completion of this study has raised a number of questions for further research. The first question emerges from the first limitation of the study. This study has captured the data for a single academic year. While this may be the first study to compare the retention rates of all three sectors of 2-year institutions, it should not be the last. A longitudinal study to compare the retention rates of 2-year institutions over a period of time may yield valuable information for all institutions as to what measures have been implemented by institutions that have demonstrated continuous improvement in the area of student persistence. The quantitative data for such a study are readily available through the IPEDS Data Center.

Secondly, the idea of student focus as a tool to improve retention is so obvious and yet so absent from the literature reviewed for this study. Each representative interviewed referenced student focus as a key to student retention and student success in the achievement of educational goals. A study of advising techniques that focus the student on his or her reason for pursuing postsecondary studies and the accomplishment of goals may provide direction for enrollment management officers who are assisting students without direction.

Academic success is vital to the improvement of student retention rates, whether full-time or part-time and regardless of the sector of institution. Two areas of academic success in the classroom bear further study. The first is the ever-present problem of student preparedness for collegiate level work. The literature consistently points to college readiness as paramount to student retention and academic success. Students who begin in developmental classes often become discouraged, and many fail to complete a program. The modular coursework in developmental studies may offer an answer for underprepared students. A case study of an institution in which the modular system has been implemented may offer a solution to one of the primary causes for student attrition.

Another area of potential study is not first suggested by this study. Tinto (2006) suggested research regarding the effect of faculty development in pedagogy on student persistence. The literature clearly indicates that faculty/student interaction in the classroom affects academic success. The proprietary institution in this study has demonstrated notable

success in retention. The administration of this institution has recognized that students in classes with great teachers are more easily retained than those in classes with mediocre teachers. As a part of the retention program of this institution, faculty members receive training in pedagogy. A study that statistically evaluates the effect of such training on student success would make a valuable contribution to the academic community of 2-year postsecondary institutions.

Conclusion

This study examined the full-time and part-time retention rates of public, independent, and proprietary 2-year institutions. These institutions have woven themselves into the very fabric of higher education in America. The literature suggests that perhaps 50% of all students in higher education are enrolled in 2-year institutions. If these students are to attain their educational goals, they must persist to completion of those goals.

Literature pertaining to the student retention rates of 4-year institutions is abundant. Student retention rates in 2-year institutions have only recently come into focus with discussion of student retention in the 2-year public community colleges. However, studies that compare the retention rates of all three sectors of 2-year institutions are absent from the literature. Since students in 2-year schools represent approximately half of the postsecondary population, a study of student persistence in these institutions is important to the college-going culture in America. As Tinto (2006) acknowledged, most studies of student retention were designed for residential populations. Students in 2-year institutions are primarily commuter students. Their concerns and reasons for pursuing a postsecondary education are often different from those of the traditional student in a 4-year institution.

The format of this study created the opportunity for explanation of quantitative findings extracted from the IPEDS Data Center through personal interviews with administrators responsible for enrollment management. These academic officers offered a wealth of information that may prove to be helpful to their colleagues in each sector of 2-year institution. Although each category of 2-year school contributes its own attributes to postsecondary education, by comparing the three categories, educators may be able to utilize innovative solutions of one institution to assist students enrolled in another sector of higher education. Recall the words of Tinto who suggested that educators must “join forces with larger educational movements that seek to restructure the way we go about the task of educating all not just some of our students” (2006, p.13).

The literature indicates the existence of no single appropriate plan to increase student retention for all institutions and all students. Each institution must examine the needs of its own students and design and implement processes that will meet those needs and assist those students in the successful completion of their educational goals. Once again recall the words of Tinto (2006) who stated, “It is one thing to identify effective action; it is another to implement it in ways that significantly enhance student retention over time” (p. 8).

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