DEGREE COMPLETION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS AND ASTIN’S STUDENT TYPOLOGY FRAMEWORK

A dissertation submitted

by

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to

the Faculty of the

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Higher Education and Student Affairs

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November 29, 2004

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Degree Completion, Student Typology
Abstract

Degree completion is an issue for stakeholders and others concerned with higher education (Astin, 1997; Braxton, 2000; Porter & National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities, 1990; Selingo, 2001). The research on degree completion in American higher education is extensive. Studies have been conducted on differences in degree completion by demographics (Pascarella, Smart, & Stoecker, 1989; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003), high school performance (Lewallen, 1993; Stage & Rushin, 1993; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987), and college performance (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Hu & St John, 2001; Tinto, 1997).

Other work in higher education however has looked at how to classify students using student types. Astin developed one of these approaches. Despite the voluminous research conducted on persistence, no one has examined the issue of degree completion using Astin’s (1993) student typology.

The purpose of this study was to explore degree completion among college students. It employed Astin’s (1993) student typology to explore differences between degree completers and dropouts. Specifically, it examined differences between degree completers and dropouts within and across Astin types by demographic characteristics, high school academic performance, and college academic performance.

The data analyzed in the study were collected from entering freshmen, by cohort, from 1994 to 1997 at three different institutions: a public master’s institution in the northeast; a private liberal arts institution in the northeast; and, a public research extensive institution in the mid-Atlantic. There were two sets of data employed in the study. The first set included responses to the Annual Freshman Survey (AFS) of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) (Sax, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2002). The second set included institutional student data records consisting of demographic characteristics of participants and high school and college performance measures.
This study examined degree completion among college students using Astin’s (1993) student typology framework. The results of this research contributed to the existing body of literature on degree completion. This study was complex and yielded a mix of statistically significant findings. However, four key findings emerged from this study. First, degree completers are more likely to earn better high school grades than dropouts. Second, middle and high-income students are more likely to graduate from college than low-income students. Third, for Status Striver type students, other (non-academic) background variables predict college academic performance in terms of college GPA and total college credits. Fourth, for Social Activist type students, other (non-academic) background variables predict grades earned in college. These findings present a new direction for research on degree completion and research-based student typologies.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation and the Ph.D. is a major milestone in my life and career. This has always been my dream and one that I aspired to achieve. As I reflect on my experiences as a doctoral student at Virginia Tech., I owe a lot of thanks to my colleagues and to my family.

I would like to extend special thanks to my advisory committee chair Dr. Joan B. Hirt. She set very high standards for me and I am forever thankful for her collegial support and encouragement. I truly appreciate her challenging me to be focused and to do my absolute best work on this dissertation. I also convey my special thanks to advisory committee members Drs. Don G. Creamer, Steve M. Janosik, John A. Muffo, and John Fallon, III. They were very supportive and always willing to take time to discuss ideas and suggest ways for me to improve my scholarship. Most important, they encouraged me to work hard and make this dissertation the top priority.

My colleagues and friends Drs. H. David Chamberlain, Theodore W. Elling, and William B. Hale who have mentored me throughout my career in higher education. They deserve my special thanks for inspiring me to pursue doctoral study and complete this degree. I appreciate their interest in my career as well as my scholarly endeavors.

The support I received from my family was very important to me. I owe so much to my wife Kim and daughters Jacqueline, Emily, and Allison for their never ending love and support throughout this entire process. They sacrificed a great deal during this process but always encouraged me to keep moving forward. I also thank my mother Anita Miller, late father Anthony Miller as well as my brother Gus and sisters Terry and Kate for their encouragement and inspiration. Their sense of family pride as being the first in our family to earn the Ph.D. inspired me to finish this dissertation.
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