FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVES: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE FIRST-YEAR

PERSISTENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

in

BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

by

Elizabeth Hincapie

2024

To: Dean William G. Hardin
     College of Business

This dissertation, written by Elizabeth Hincapie, and entitled
a student's perspectives: factors that influence first-year persistence in higher education, having
been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Florida International University, 2024

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Edwin, my two children, Jordan and Juliette who

experienced and sacrificed their time to support me through the entire duration of being a

doctoral student. To my mother who taught me to be the woman I am today and the sacrifices

she made for my education

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have contributed to the realization of this dissertation.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Committee Chair, Dr. George Marakas for his unwavering support, guidance, and invaluable expertise throughout this research journey. His and suggestions have been instrumental in shaping the direction and quality of this thesis. I am immensely grateful for their dedication and commitment to my academic growth.

I am deeply indebted to my family for their unwavering love, support, and encouragement during this challenging academic endeavor. Their belief in me and my aspirations has been a constant source of motivation, and I could not have reached this milestone without their support.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor George Marakas, Major Professor

The importance of higher education for students is evident, as the experiences and academic achievements they gain at university can have a lasting impact on their personal growth and long-term career prospects. To gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence a student's choice to continue their studies after their first year of college, this research will explore the various components that contribute to student persistence post-first year. These factors include academic and faculty integration, social support, financial resources, and institutional support.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of higher education is widely recognized, as students' experiences and academic success at university can have a long-term influence on their personal development and future career prospects. To better understand the factors influencing a student's decision to reenroll after their first year of college, this study is grounded in studies on enrollment in higher education institutions. Student success is a crucial component of higher education institutions since it is considered an essential criterion for assessing the quality of educational institutions (National Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2015).

During this period of higher education, students are expected to learn to work independently, form good study habits, and take charge of their education for the first time (Tinto, 1999). A student's scholastic and professional future can be significantly influenced by their performance in their first year of college, which, in turn, can be affected by factors such as academic preparedness, social integration, financial support, and institutional support. Academic preparedness is assessed through prior academic success, exam results, and demonstrated ability to succeed at the collegiate level, while social integration involves the student's level of involvement with and acceptance among their peers and the campus. Financial resources—irrespective of whether a student has been awarded scholarships and grants or is entirely responsible for their own tuition—can also impact a student's academic performance. Universities and schools can assume more responsibility in ensuring the success of their first-year students by implementing measures such as academic and social support programs, financial aid, and an inclusive and accepting campus culture.

One definition of student success in the literature is as follows: "Student success is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance" (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

Problem Statement

The recent drop in undergraduate participation in the United States is a cause for serious concern, as higher education is essential for both personal and social growth. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, there was an 8% decrease in college attendance from 2019 to 2022, while the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the decline in the college-going rate since 2018 is the largest it has ever been. Additionally, the percentage of high school seniors entering college the autumn after they graduate has fallen from a peak of 70% in 2016 to 63% in 2020, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (Nadworny & Carrillo, 2023). There are several causes for this decline, including the competitive nature of the labor market, the proliferation of professional training and job opportunities, and the increasing need for new technological skills in the digital era that is not always fulfilled in traditional higher education settings. Furthermore, students are sometimes forced to forgo college due to problems at home, such as the necessity to take care of younger siblings or elderly family members. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on higher education institutions, from the requirement to close campuses and provide online lessons to budgetary difficulties and health hazards. Additionally, the rising cost of higher education is a major obstacle for many students, with more than four in ten bachelor's degree holders under the age of 45 not believing that the

advantages of their education outweigh the expenses (According to the Hechinger Report, 2022). Another poll conducted by Cengage, an educational publishing and technology firm, revealed that only 25% of recent graduates said that they would choose the same educational route again if they had the chance. Additionally, community colleges have witnessed the greatest decline in enrollment. This decline is largely attributed to the increasing cost of higher education, which has skyrocketed since 2008, especially in California, where it has doubled. This rise in cost has had a significant impact on student decision-making in terms of enrollment.

Data points from two- and four-year universities suggest that the decline is most pronounced in the two-year institutions, which recorded a decrease of 5.4% for the period 2014–2018. In comparison, four-year universities saw a decline of 2.3%, suggesting that more students are possibly opting to attend four-year universities in terms of higher education. The decline in enrollment can be attributed to a variety of factors, such as rising tuition costs, the availability of online courses, and the increasing popularity of industry certifications such as cloud solution certificates.

The **purpose of this study** is to examine the following variables to determine any significant factors of persistence after the first year of college:

- Personal attributes, which are operationalized as student demographic attributes

- Academic factors, which include college academic performance (measured by college cumulative grade point average), academic integration, and faculty integration

- Social interaction and belonging, which includes the support from institutions and social involvement from peers

- Socio-economic status (measured by financial status and parental education background and support)

Significance of the Problem

Currently, the statistics on student dropout are alarming; 32.9% of the undergraduate students in a degree-seeking program terminate their studies before completion. According to the National Student Clearing House Center, as of July 2020, 39 million Americans (about 17% of the total adult population) had some college experience but no degree. Of this population, 34.2% were under 35 years of age. In the case of four-year institutions, 18.4% of first-year students dropped out in 2019–2020 (McFarland, J., Cui, J., Holmes, J., and Wang, X. (2019). The rate of dropouts from two-year institutions is even higher, at 39.0%.

Research Gap

Currently, there are several studies across various aspects and focus on students' transition from the end of their first year in college to the beginning of their second year. However, measuring student persistence can be a much longer and more complex process. Students may reenroll for multiple years, but dropping out is still a reality for many of them. Furthermore, students may decide at any time (mid-year or mid-semester) to drop out of post-secondary education or transfer to another college.

Another limitation is of an accurate reflection of the experiences of low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation, and working-class students.

Research Question

What factors influence degree-seeking student enrollment after the first year of college in a two- or four-year program in the United States?

Research Contributions

Persistence at the university level may constitute a challenge for many students. Factors such as financial constraints, a lack of support, and unpredictable life events may compel them to drop out of university. Additionally, students often face pressure to perform well in their courses, which can lead to anxiety and stress, further contributing to their lack of persistence. To help students succeed and remain persistent, universities can provide financial support, counseling services, and academic resources to assist them in their studies. By understanding the factors that influence students' academic persistence after their first year of education, educational institutions can adopt an integrated approach to their retention efforts by incorporating academic, social, and economic factors. They can design and develop programs to create a socially inclusive and supportive academic environment that addresses the needs of students who struggle to persist in their educational pursuit.

CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

This literature review examines student retention in higher education institutions. In particular, it considers the background and history of student retention, four student retention theories, and the existing literature on student retention in educational institutions. Student retention in higher education is typically defined as the continued enrollment of a student from the first year to the second year (Bean 1980, 1982; Spady 1970; Tinto 1975, 1993). The models reviewed in this section are four of the most-cited student retention theoretical models in the

existing literature. These theoretical models are (1) Tinto's persistence model, (2) the undergraduate dropout process model (Spady, 1970, 1971), (3) the institutional departure model (Tinto, 1975, 1993), and (4) the student attrition model (Bean, 1980, 1982).

Tinto's Persistence Model

Tinto's persistence model is an educational theory formulated by Vincent Tinto that emphasizes the importance of student involvement in the educational process and the role of active learning in student success. The model establishes a relationship between student participation and academic success, suggesting that students must be actively engaged in the learning process in order to experience academic success. It includes four components: commitment to learning, academic and social integration, involvement in active learning, and a supportive environment. The model emphasized that to reduce student attrition, there must be a learning environment that fosters student participation and encourages students to stay in school.

The Undergraduate Dropout Process Model

Many authors and researchers in the domain of student retention consider William Spady's undergraduate dropout process model (1970, 1971) as the first theoretical and systematic model in the literature on student retention. Spady's main assumption was that the outcome of this interaction determines the level of students' integration within the academic and social systems of their institutions and, subsequently, their persistence. According to Spady, a student's decision to stay in or withdraw from their academic institution is influenced by two main factors in each of two systems: grades and intellectual development in the academic system and normative congruence and friendship support in the social system. The model helps

understand the reason students choose to drop out of their undergraduate studies. It is based on the idea that students decide to drop out due to a combination of environmental, academic, and personal factors. Furthermore, the model suggests that the students who are more likely to drop out are those who struggle academically and/or experience negative environmental factors, such as a lack of social support and financial difficulties. Additionally, the model considers personal factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and the student's overall satisfaction with their college experience. By understanding the different factors that lead to a student's decision to drop out, universities can develop strategies to retain and support their students.

The Institutional Departure Model

Building on Spady's (1970, 1971) theoretical views on the undergraduate dropout process, Tinto published the first version of his well-recognized institutional departure model, which is also known as the student integration model (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's institutional departure model is a framework that suggests that students' commitment to their educational institution is the key factor in determining their success. It emphasizes the importance of a strong sense of community and connection to the institution as well as the need for continuous support from the faculty, staff, and other students. Tinto argued that students' persistence or departure—especially in the first year of college—reflects their success or failure in navigating the stages toward integration into the community of the institution (Aljohani, Othman). He also suggested that the closer a student's relationship is to the institution and the more support they receive, the more likely they are to persist and succeed. This model has been widely accepted and adopted by universities and other educational institutions as a way to increase student engagement, persistence, and, ultimately, student success.

Bean's Student Attrition Model

  Bean's student attrition model is a predictive model that uses data-driven insights to help institutions better understand their student populations and predict the likelihood of student attrition. The synthetic model identifies four classes of variables: background variables, organizational variables, environmental variables, and attitudinal and outcome variables—all of which have direct or indirect effects on students' intent to leave, which is the immediate precursor of dropping out. (Bean, 1961) The model relies on a combination of these data points to accurately predict student attrition. Bean's model can help institutions identify at-risk students before they leave, facilitating the implementation of targeted intervention strategies. Furthermore, the model provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of interventions and helps institutions improve their retention rates.

  In the next section, this study will dive deeper into the research on the importance and connection between the different variables and the theories mentioned.

Literature Review on Factors that Influence Student Persistence

Student Persistence

Completing the studies in the educational process for students is not only about student success but also serves the purpose of the institution's effectiveness. Bank et al. (1990), indicates that students' persistence significantly depended on how well they were integrated academically and socially within the institution. The higher a student's sense of belonging is embedded in the academic and social university, the better an outcome will be achieved. This approach adds the weights of involvement and "belonging," two main persistence points.

Furthermore, Braunstein et al. (2000) put Bank and others to the test from a different perspective by focusing on nontraditional students, such as adult learners or those pursuing their education part-time. Among the reasons the researchers provide is that family obligations, work schedule students, and those that affect the persistence of decisions they make have more significant playing roles than those of the traditional-aged full-time students. This model indicates the need for cooperation among the institutions to ensure that these needs are met by giving more thought to the broader life context of the student population when designing support systems to guarantee student retention.

Literature suggests that students with clear academic integration and community plays a vital role, However, although there are several external factors that may be different and do not follow a traditional path. Those perspectives can create a multifaceted perception of what could influence student persistence factors, hence the immediate need for public institutions to develop strategies to accommodate internal and external factors concerning student engagement and retention.

Academic Factors, Integration and Preparedness

A critical factor in a student's journey through university is their academic performance, which is crucial in order for them to achieve future career success. This performance is largely determined by high school grades and course grades and is often indicated by the grade point average (GPA). The GPA is a significant factor of consideration when a student is admitted to a university as a first-year student (Adekitan & Noma-Osaghae, 2018).

Academic integration is an important factor in student persistence. Studies have shown that when students are able to integrate with their peers and faculty in an academic setting, they are more likely to stay enrolled in the institution for the long term. When students feel that they are part of the academic community, they are more likely to feel connected to the school, their classmates, and their professors. This connection helps foster a sense of belonging and motivation to continue their studies. Additionally, academic integration helps students gain access to the resources and support they need in order to succeed, such as access to faculty mentors, career services, and other resources. Consequently, academic integration plays a crucial role in helping students remain on track and persist in their education.

Higher education institutions assume the responsibility of serving underprepared and underrepresented populations, which can cause transition issues for traditional-aged college students during the first year (Raab & Adam, 2005). Researchers have increasingly become aware of the social and economic factors that contribute to how well students transition from secondary to post-secondary institutions. If students do not resolve their transition issues in the first year, especially during the first semester, the likelihood of them persisting at the same institution is diminished, which affects future enrollments and graduation rates (Raab & Adam, 2005).

Faculty Integration

Faculty integration entails the process of students' assimilation into an environment that will ensure their academic success. Adekitan and Noma-Osaghae (2018) stated that faculty integration includes mentorship, academic advice, and student support programs. A negative relationship with the teaching staff can influence a student's intention to not persist after the first year. It can affect the student's learning environment and cause them to drop out of school. The greater the academic and social integration, the higher is the likelihood of student persistence (Asera, 1998; O'Brien & Shedd, 2001; Tucker, 1999). Nora (1993) defined academic integration as the development of a strong affiliation with the academic environment of the college both within and outside the classroom. It may be developed through learning-centered interactions with faculty, academic peers, and staff as well as informal social contact with faculty and involvement in student organizations (Braxton & McClendon, 2002).

Socioeconomic and Financial Factors

According to Winding and Andersen (2015), a student's social relationships, including their family's support, their peers' influence, and their involvement in school, play a significant role in their decision to drop out of school. Dropout rates were found to be lower among students of all socioeconomic backgrounds who had supportive parents. The level of family support and encouragement young people receive plays a crucial role in preventing school dropout (Winding & Andersen, 2015). Winding & Anderson also discussed how the state of the economy influences the number of students who drop out of school. Education costs include tuition fees, grants, and loans. They also suggest that improving social connections, especially between students and their families and between students and their schools, should be prioritized in policymaking in order to

bridge the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Policies that aim to increase support for households with low incomes can include support for expenses such as food, housing, and transportation.

Family dynamics also play a role in a young person's decision to continue their studies, and some works of research contend that students' social networks can be a predictor of whether or not they will persist in their education. A student's decision to continue their education at a university can be heavily influenced by their family's socioeconomic status. According to Muzenda (2014), a lack of financial resources is a significant factor in students' decisions to drop out. Obtaining student loans and other forms of financial aid can be challenging for many students (Muzenda, 2014). Consequently, they may be forced to abandon their education, and addressing students' financial concerns is crucial to improving retention rates. According to Burke (2019), providing financial help (such as offering low-interest loans) as well as academic and social support to students from poor financial backgrounds can help address socioeconomic and family dynamics that lead to dropouts.

The impact of financial distress on college completion is a crucial research topic in academia. Emphasis is placed on the challenges and implications for policies and practices. Existing literature examines the potential connection between financial factors and students' academic pursuits.

Recent research by Smathers et al. (2022) has shed light on the significant impact of financial stress on student dropout rates. Their quantitative study surveyed students from various institutions and regions, revealing that financial strain is a major determining factor in whether students will continue their studies or drop out. This study provides empirical evidence that financial struggles are a significant barrier to students' success in higher education.

Similarly, Muzeda (2014) conducted a comprehensive investigation into the psychological effects of financial stress on student retention, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The study found that financially distressed students experience negative impacts on their academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being, which can ultimately affect their ability to persist in college. It highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of financial stress and its impact on students.

The need for a comprehensive approach to address financial stress as a factor in student persistence. This includes not only financial assistance but also psychological and academic support systems. By recognizing the multifaceted nature of financial stress, educators can better support students in their completion of higher education.

Parental support is also an important factor in helping students persist in their studies. Research has shown that when students' parents provide them with emotional and practical support, their likelihood persisting in their studies increases. Parental support includes helping with academic tasks, providing motivation, monitoring school activities, and offering emotional support. Parental support has a number of benefits, including enhanced academic performance, positive relationships with teachers, improved attendance, and increased self-esteem. Additionally, research has also demonstrated that parental support is a key factor in helping students persist in their studies even in times of difficulty and discouragement, can be a vital part of the learning process, and can have a profound impact on students' educational trajectory.

Financial aid and tuition costs can have a significant impact on a student's persistence in higher education. The student's financial situation can affect their ability to pay tuition and cover other related costs, which may create a barrier to their persistence. Research has found that students who receive financial aid are more likely to persist in their academic pursuits. This is

due to the fact that these students are able to cover the cost of tuition and other related expenses and, thus, do not need to worry about the financial burden of attending school. Additionally, high tuition costs can make it difficult for students to afford school, which may lead them to drop out or not enroll at all. Thus, financial aid and tuition costs can both have an effect on student persistence and should be taken into consideration while considering the issue of student persistence.

Meyer (2010) defined family socioeconomic status as the factors that encompass qualities of family composition, poverty levels, employment status, and parental education backgrounds. Wells, Keen, and Zimmerman (2007) elaborated that family factors contribute to students' likelihood of either dropping out of or remaining in school. Along this dimension, in a study conducted by Meyer (2010), students mentioned parental support as a factor that helped them remain in college. Additionally, Ginsberg and Miller-Cribbs (2000) indicated that a lack of parental involvement in an abusive home was found to be correlated with a higher likelihood of dropping out of college. Likewise, living in a violent and dysfunctional home environment or single-parent households, experiencing language differences, and having poorly educated parents were found to be associated with the student having an influence Student's to drop out. (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

Family Educational Background

The central role of the family in affecting a student's educational attainment is well documented. A large number of studies have confirmed that family background, especially in early childhood, exerts a strong influence on children's educational outcomes, with children from families of higher socioeconomic status families academically outperforming those from families

with a lower socioeconomic status (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003; Duncan et al., 1994; 1998; 2010). Moreover, early childhood educational inequality is predictive of inequalities in other domains in later life.

Social Integration & Belonging

Social integration is defined as students' interpersonal relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff, which creates a sense of community and campus life engagement (Tinto, 1975). It is measured by the number of positive interactions with peers, faculty and engagement with extracurricular activities (Tinto, 1975). Social integration and involvement are key factors when it comes to student persistence. Students who feel supported by their peers, family, and teachers and are actively involved in their school communities are more likely to remain in school and succeed. Studies have shown that a student's sense of belonging and connection to their school is a strong predictor of their academic success. Having a sense of purpose, confidence, and an understanding of the importance of their studies can help students remain motivated to persist through challenging moments. Additionally, when students have positive relationships with their teachers and peers, they are more likely to form a connection to their school and feel supported in their learning journey. Social support and involvement are essential pieces of the puzzle when it comes to student persistence.

Social relations have been conceived in a general framework as having three different dimensions: (1) social relations in the family, (2) social relations with friends, and (3) social relations with teachers and classmates (Winding, T. N., & Andersen, J. H., 2015). Social factors leading to school dropouts include negative peers and role models. Engagement with peers who have a negative attitude toward education can have an impact on education termination. Also,

involvement in income-generating activities is a challenge confronting college education. Learners may forgo their studies and fully involve themselves in income-generating activities.

Campus Safety

In 2013, Chekwa et al. conducted a study to examine the dimensions of campus security and its impact on college students. This research focuses on understanding students' attitudes towards safety while on campus, as it is a crucial aspect of their academic experience. The study highlights the importance of campus security in promoting student well-being and academic success. Through interviews and focus groups, the researchers gathered insights into the safety concerns of college students. Using a qualitative research approach, Chekwa and colleagues delved deeper into the issue of campus safety and gained a thorough understanding of how it is perceived by students. Their findings revealed that safety concerns greatly affect student retention and persistence. It also shed light on the various factors and risks that contribute to these concerns. The research emphasized the need for a multi-faceted approach to campus safety. While institutional measures play a crucial role, social and environmental factors also significantly impact students' safety, well-being and highlighted the importance of communication and transparency in addressing safety issues, calling for collaboration between students, faculty, and administration for a safer and conducive learning environment.

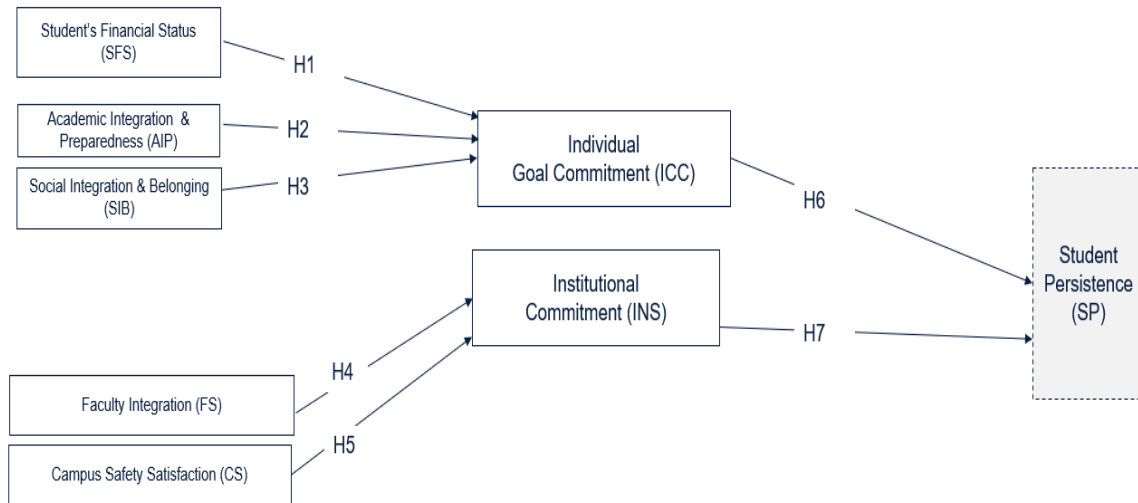CHAPTER III: RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS

Theoretical Framework & Development

Students' encounters with their academic and social settings constitute crucial factors in determining whether or not they graduate. Academic advice, teacher contact, assimilation into college life, both academically and socially, and other similar aspects are all significant. A students' good experiences in these domains shall increase their probability of persistence by fostering a feeling of belonging and a commitment to the school. Additionally, many students find it challenging to continue their studies due to the conflicts between their obligations and their scholastic duties (Tinto, 2017). According to Tinto, schools can help students stay on course by acknowledging and addressing their obligations outside school and offering them the tools they need in order to succeed. The student persistence model is a helpful paradigm for analyzing the myriad variables determining whether first-year college students decide to continue their education. Supporting student success and encouraging retention and perseverance in higher education can be achieved through the implementation of institutional strategies that consider students' pre-entry traits, school experiences, and external obligations.

The student persistence model provides an explanatory structure for the variables influencing students' decisions to stay in school. As proposed by the model, pre-entry traits, institutional experience, and external obligations are the three interconnected variables that affect student perseverance. A student's race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, and family assistance are all examples of pre-entry traits. The student's choice to stay in school or drop out is affected by their level of preparedness for the academic and social challenges they will encounter.

Research Model

A theoretical model is proposed below with a particular emphasis on individual and institutional commitment to seven independent variables, their interactions and how it contributes to a student's decision to persist after their first year of university.

Table 1: Research Model

Constructs

	Construct	Definition	Reference
DV	Student persistence (SP)	A student will likely remain enrolled in and graduate from their chosen higher education institution.	(Tinto, V. (2017)
IV	Academic integration and preparedness (AIP)	Academic integration and preparedness are defined as how well graduate students navigate in their daily academic lives in the higher education institution, including their GPAs.	Moi Mooi Lew (2022)
IV	Social integration and belonging (SIB)	Social integration includes feeling a sense of belonging and connection to the college community, which is crucial for student persistence. Students who make friends, participate in campus activities, and engage with faculty and staff are more likely to stay in college.

It is the extent to which a student feels connected to the college environment, peers, faculty, and | Veronica A. Lotkowski, Steven B Robbins (2004) |

		others in college and is involved in campus activities.	
IV	Faculty Integration (FI)	This includes the amount of communication and collaboration between students and educational personnel, indicating a student's level of satisfaction with faculty integration, communication, and collaboration between students.	(Tinto, V. (2017)
IV	Student Financial security (SFS)	Sum of money and other aid that can be used to cover a student's education costs.	(Tinto, 1999)
IV	Campus safety (CS)	Campus Safety alludes to the measures, policies, and practices executed by a college to guarantee the safety and wellbeing of its understudies, staff, and guests. It includes physical security, emergency response plans, crime prevention methodologies, and student support services.	Fisher et al. (1998)
IV	Individual commitment (ICC)	Individual commitment helps specify the psychological orientations that an individual brings with them into the college setting.	Tinto (1975)
IV	Institutional commitment (INS)	Institutional commitment is the end result of the successful match between an individual's motivation and academic ability and the institution's academic and social characteristics. Institutional support includes the support and resources provided by the college or university, which can greatly impact student persistence. This includes academic advice, tutoring services, counseling, financial aid, and career services.	Amaury Nora and Alberto F. Cabrera (1993)

Hypothesis

#	Hypothesis Statements
H1	As student financial status (SFS) increases, a student's individual commitment increases.
H2	As academic integration and preparedness (AIP) increases, a student's persistence is higher.
H3	As social integration and belonging (SIB) increases, an individual's commitment becomes higher.
H4	As the level of campus safety (CS) increases, a student's perception of institutional commitment increases.
H5	As faculty integration (FI) increases, a student's perception of institutional commitment increases.
H6	As a student's individual commitment (ICC) increases, the student's persistence becomes higher.
H7	As a student's perception of (INS) increases, the student's persistence becomes higher.

H1:   *As **Student Financial Status (SFS)** increases, a student's individual commitment*

increases.

This hypothesis recommends a positive relationship between a student's financial means

and a student's individual commitment in their first year of study. Students from families with a

large income tend to persist more than students from families with less income (Cabrera,

Stampen, & Hanson, 1990; St. John, 1989, 1990; St. John et al., 1991). The receipt of financial

aid has a positive impact on students' persistence, especially when the aid is in the form of grants

and scholarships (Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Perna, 1997; St. John, 1989, 1990; St. John et al.,

1991; Somers, 1993). Moreover, students tend to be more responsive to increases in financial aid

than to tuition reductions (St. John, 1990), and the ability to pay affects their persistence decision

(Cabrera et al., 1990). The receipt of financial aid affects other variables influencing persistence,

such as student psychology, social integration, and intent to persist (Cabrera et al., 1992a).

Meyer (2010) defined family socioeconomic status as the factors that encompass qualities of

family composition, poverty levels, employment status, and parental education backgrounds. Wells, Keen, and Zimmerman (2007) elaborated that family factors contribute to the likelihood of either dropping out of or remaining in school.

H2: *As **academic integration and Preparedness (AIP)** increases, a student's persistence is higher.*

Researchers have sought to understand the influence of college academic performance on persistence by conducting both national and institutional studies from the first to the second year and beyond. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found college grades to be one of the most consistent predictors of student persistence and degree completion. High school grades and scholastic measures are recognized by many researchers as the most reliable predictors of academic achievement and college persistence (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Astin, 1971, 1973, 1997; Hoffman & Lowitzi, 2005). Several researchers have found that a student's academic integration and their perception of being academically challenged at their school promote a greater amount of intellectual development that results in better educational outcomes, such as better grades and successful graduation (Baker et al., 2008)

H3: *As **social integration & belonging (SIB)** increases, a student's perception of institutional commitment becomes higher.*

Social support refers to the care and support people feel from others (Raschke, 1977). Based on the perspective of interpersonal relationships, social support can be divided into three categories: emotional support refers to providing others with empathy, warmth, love, and trust; instrumental support refers to providing material help and services to those in need; and

informational support refers to helping others solve problems by providing useful suggestions (House et al., 1988)

A student's social involvement with peer groups can positively impact student retention in college. Studies have shown that peer support, which is the interpersonal connections among age-matched individuals established through common activities and mutual cooperation, is an important source of social support for college students (Lamis et al., 2016; Burns et al., 2020). Students with healthy support from their peers are more likely to persist in their studies. Social influence is another predominant theme. Students with healthy support from their peers are more likely to persist in their studies. Social factors such as peer pressure, peer integration, homesickness, and difficulty getting used to a new environment can contribute to students' dropout rates in private tertiary institutions (Muzenda, 2014).

H4: *As the level of **campus safety (CS)** increases, a student's perception of institutional commitment increases.*

This hypothesis sets a positive correlation between an increase in the level of campus security inside an institution and a student's growing perception of institutional commitment. This correlation is grounded in the idea that when students feel secure in their campus environment, they are more likely to feel valued by the institution. An increased sense of security contributes to a positive learning environment, strengthening the institution's commitment to student wellbeing and success. Previous research has revealed factors that may influence campus safety (or the lack thereof) and students' perceived safety. Informed by the lifestyle-routine activities approach, the analysis revealed that the risk of property victimization is increased by proximity to crime, target attractiveness, exposure, and lack of guardianship (Fisher et al. 1998).

H5: *As **faculty integration (FI)** increases, a student's perception of institutional commitment increases.*

The development of a caring, supportive, and welcoming environment within the university is critical to creating a sense of belonging. Such an environment can be achieved through the creation of positive student–faculty relationships. The presence of well-resourced faculty and university resources can influence a student's experience and impact student attrition. Wells, Bechard, and Hambly (1989) define institutional-related factors as structures and activities within the school day that may contribute to or fail to discourage disengaging behaviors. Considering that these factors comprise actions that occur during the normal school day, they have either positive or negative effects on students' learning experiences in the institution. Students who believe that their instructors can adequately prepare them to succeed in the classroom experience higher rates of retention. Examples of institutional faculty factors include faculty communication, lecturer attendance, library resources, and lecturer competence.

H6: As the student's **individual commitment (ICC)** increases, the student's persistence becomes higher.
The hypothesis sets a positive correlation between the increase in a student's overall individual commitment to a student's likelihood to persist.'

H7: As the student's perception **of Institutional Commitment (INS)** increases, student's persistence will be higher.

Institutional commitment stresses the role played by the institution's commitment and its influence on a student's persistence when it combines information from these areas" social integration and belonging, faculty integration, and campus security. Institutional commitment is essential in helping students persist by providing a supportive environment that encourages success, institutions can help foster a sense of belonging and commitment among their students. This support may include providing access to resources such as financial aid, tutoring, and career guidance services.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research design and methodology adapted for this study. The chapter is organized into six sections following the introduction: (1) Participants, (2) Data Collection, (3) Research Design, (4) Development of the Instrument, (5) Informed Pilot, and (6) Measurements.

Participants

The participants' eligibility for inclusion had the following criteria: (a) the participant must be a degree-seeking college student in a two-or four-year program, (b) the participant must be between 18 and 25 years of age when enrolled, and (c) the participant must have been enrolled for 12 months, following which they either persisted or discontinued. The study included 164 respondents.

The student demographics (gender), family characteristics (family income and financial aid status), academic performance (college cumulative GPA), and geographic location of the undergraduate location of residence.

The questionnaire was distributed across four geographically disbursed areas in United States, and 200 questionnaires were received, 36 were excluded; 164 were processed for analysis.

Table 4.1: Number of completed and accepted respondents

	% distribution
Current university students	50%
Students who dropped out	51%
Total	100%

Data Collection

The data collection method for this study involved administering a survey questionnaire to gather information from students regarding their perceptions of campus resources, academic success indicators, campus climate, and persistence. The survey began by collecting demographic information, such as age and gender, to provide context for the findings. Likert scale questions were used to assess the students' satisfaction with campus safety, academic advising services, and financial aid support, among other factors. The questionnaire also explored students' academic success indicators by asking about their academic preparedness and any challenges they may have faced. Furthermore, the participants' perceptions of the campus climate, including their sense of belonging and inclusivity, were assessed. To measure persistence and future plans, the participants indicated their commitment to completing their degree at the university and their intentions for further education after their graduation.

As part of the data collection, it was also important to include a good representation of both students who were in school and those who had dropped out. As part of the collection, 50% of respondents were current university students and 51% were students who dropped out. In addition, respondents were distributed across the US –Northeast (27%), Midwest (20%), West (18%) and South (34%).

Research Design & Instrument

An online Qualtrics survey was used to collect specific information from the student pool regarding their first-year experience in a degree-seeking college setting (two- or four-year program). The goals of this survey were to measure the variables and identify patterns that may reveal the factors that influence the decision to predict the dependent variable: college persistence. The survey included 68 questions. The quantitative instrument utilized in this research took the form of an online survey questionnaire. It consisted of multiple closed-ended questions with pre-defined response options, allowing participants to select their answers easily.

Once the survey was developed in Qualtrics, researcher sourced CloudResearch.com, a company focused on recruiting survey participants for market research and online surveys. The instrument was designed to collect numerical data that could be analyzed statistically to draw meaningful conclusions. To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, there was also pilot to test the survey questions with a small group of respondents. This process helped identify any potential issues or areas of improvement, such as ambiguous wording or unclear response options. Once the survey instrument was finalized, it was distributed to a targeted sample of participants comprising university students still in school and those who had dropped out.

Pilot Study

A thorough pilot study was conducted to test the questionnaire before proceeding with the actual research. This small-scale study allowed the researchers to find any potential issues or make any necessary changes.

In preparing for the pilot study, the final questionnaire was assembled and launched on the Qualtrics Data Collection & Management platform. In addition to the survey items for each of the incorporated scales, control questions ranging from age, gender and income were also included as well. Initially, the first pilot study and participant recruitment was done via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Fifty (n=50) completed responses were validated relative to the duration of time spent taking the survey and were paid $1.50 for successful completion of the survey. Researcher completed analysis and shortly realized there was an issue with data integrity and results would not load in a meaningful way. After a few reviews with committee, it was determined it was likely quality of data which was causing data anomalies.

Researcher decided to run a second informed pilot through CloudResearch.com. The aim was to re-test the survey questionnaire and construct loadings. Seventy-five (n=75) completed responses were validated relative to the duration of time spent taking the survey and were paid $2.00 for their time. Additionally, the test of reliability and the exploratory factor matrix of the questionnaire were assessed.

An exploratory factor analysis with rotated correlation matrix was completed (Appendix A). After performing an EFA with principal component analysis (PCA) extraction and Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation, the results provided valuable insights for refining the questionnaire. Items with low loadings on all components (below 0.7 in absolute value) were not strongly related to the underlying factors and were removed.

Measurements

A descriptive analysis will be presented, starting with the main characteristics of the respondents and covering the trends of their opinions obtained from their answers. Secondly, and inferential analysis was conducted using Exploratory Factor Analysis in the first stage to explore the underlying structure (latent factors) of the questionnaire items. All the data analysis for this study was conducted using SPSS software.

CHAPTER V: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of data collected for this study, which examined the factors influencing student persistence past first year at higher learning institutions in the United States. The analysis included reliability tests, frequency analysis on respondent profiles, descriptive analysis on variables, correlation analysis, and exploratory factor analysis. A total of 164 students were validated, including those who remained enrolled and those who dropped out after their first year.

The results are presented in four sections:

1. Descriptive Statistics: This section will summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and key trends in their responses to the questionnaire items.

2. Validity and Reliability: Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire data to ensure the data is a valid measure of the intended constructs.

3. Inferential Statistics: This section will examine into the relationships between the questionnaire items via Correlation Analysis and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): This analysis explores the underlying structure of the measured variables using exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

4. EFA is a statistical technique that aims to identify a small number of latent constructs, also known as factors, that explain the relationships between a set of observed variables. These factors represent the core dimensions that capture the shared variance among the observed measures.

Respondents' Demographic Data

The study was conducted across students in the United States, surveying those who were still in school (%) and those who had dropped out of university (%). A total of 234 respondents consented to participate in the study, comprising 100% of the responses. No participant declined to participate. Moreover, nearly equal numbers of male 99 (46%) and female 114 (54%) respondents participated in this study.

The most common way in which the respondents funded their college tuition was a combination of personal responsibility and financial aid and/or scholarships (35%). This was followed by family support (34%) and full financial aid and/or scholarships (19%). The highest level of education completed by the parents of the respondents varied, with the majority of them primarily holding college degrees (33% and 36%, respectively), followed by being high school graduates (23% and 27%, respectively), and having some college experience (20% and 18%, respectively). The first-year completion year varied, with the most recent being 2024 (11%) and the most common being 2020 (30%).

The age distribution of the respondents indicated that the vast majority (99%) were between the ages of 18 and 25 years. The majority of the respondents (73%) reported a GPA between 3.1 and 3.9 on a 4.0 scale. The study participants were predominantly those who had completed their first year of either a two- or a four-year degree (69%), while 16% had not yet completed their first year and 15% were in their first year at the time of the study. Among those who did not intend to continue into their second year of university (11%), financial constraints (26%), personal reasons such as health or family situations (15%), and transfer to another institution (13%) were the most commonly cited reasons.

Table 4.2: Questionnaire Items and Values.

Questionnaire items		N	%
Q2 What is your gender?	Female	93	56.0%
	Male	73	44.0%
Q3 Select one response	I am responsible for paying my school tuition	11	6.6%
	I lost my financial aid after first year of college	4	2.4%
	My college tuition is being paid by a family member	58	34.9%
	My college tuition is funded completely by financial aid and/or scholarship	32	19.3%
	My college tuition is partly funded by financial aid and/or scholarship, and I am responsible for the remainder of the tuition.	61	36.7%
Q4 Select the highest grade or level of school that your mother has completed	Graduated 4-year College	58	34.9%
	High School Graduate	38	22.9%
	Some College	32	19.3%
	Graduated 2-year College	18	10.8%
	PHD	10	6.0%
	Junior (Grade 11)	8	4.8%
	Senior (Grade 12)	1	0.6%
Q5 Select the highest grade or level of school your father has completed	Graduated 4-year College	60	36.1%
	High School Graduate	46	27.7%
	Some College	29	17.5%
	PHD	14	8.4%
	Junior (Grade 11)	8	4.8%
	Graduated 2-year College	7	4.2%
	Senior (Grade 12)	1	0.6%
Q6: In what year did you complete your first year of college?	2020	43	25.9%
	2021	28	16.9%
	2022	34	20.5%
	2023	40	24.1%
	graduating in 2024	19	11.4%
		2	1.2%
Q7 What is your age?	18-25 years of age	166	#####
Q8 What is your current GPA (4.0 Scale)?	1.0 - 2.0	4	2.4%
	2.1 - 3.0	25	15.1%
	3.1 - 3.9	118	71.1%
	4.0 - 4.9	19	11.4%

Q 9 Have you completed first year of either a 2 year or 4 year degree?	In my first year now of college now	30	18.1%
	Yes	136	81.9%
Q 11 Do you intend to continue on to your second year of university?	Yes	134	80.7%
	No	19	11.4%
	Unsure	13	7.8%
Q 12 If you do not intend to continue, which of the following describes the reason why plan to not return:	I could not afford to return financially	16	9.6%
	Personal Reason (health, family situations)	9	5.4%
	Transferring to another institution	8	4.8%
	Struggled to pass classes	3	1.8%
	I couldn't return because I was no longer eligible	1	0.6%
	I did not feel I belonged	1	0.6%
	I did not feel safe on campus	1	0.6%
	I did not feel that faculty/staff cared about me	1	0.6%
	Lost scholarship	1	0.6%
	Other	20	12.0%

Descriptive Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed using the SPSS. The research questions were restated in the null form to test the null hypotheses and examine the relationship between academic integration, campus safety, faculty integration, social integration, and individual and institutional commitment. Descriptive statistics was used to summarize the status of each variable using a frequency distribution, means (M), and standard deviations (SD). The factors that were expected to have an impact on student persistence were classified into eight constructs: academic preparedness, campus safety satisfaction, faculty integration, social belonging, student financial status, student persistence, individual commitment, and institutional commitment. The data-merged analysis of the responses and the key points raised by the respondents are presented

below. The respondents expressed their views and their degrees of agreement with the statements as follows:

Table 4.3: Descriptive Analysis

	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std Deviation
Academic integration and preparedness	166	3.55	3.67	3.67	0.75
Campus safety satisfaction	166	3.47	3.67	3.33	1.15
Faculty Integration	162	3.59	3.80	4.00	0.75
Individual commitment	162	3.86	4.00	4.00	0.72
Institutional commitment	162	3.86	4.00	4.00	0.87
Social integration and belonging	163	3.35	3.44	4.00	0.95
Student financial status	162	3.59	3.80	4.00	0.75
Student persistence	160	3.49	3.53	3.53	0.37

Academic Integration and Preparedness

The students generally expressed moderate to high levels of satisfaction with their academic integration and preparedness. They reported moderate satisfaction with their first-year cumulative GPA (M = 3.61, SD = 1.219) and academic preparedness before entering university (M = 3.49, SD = 1.225). They also exhibited high motivation to excel academically (M = 3.69, SD = 1.099) and reported setting clear and realistic academic goals (M = 3.62, SD = 1.120). On the other hand, there were some reservations about the university's academic advising services (M = 3.42, SD = 1.156) and the academic workload (M = 3.45, SD = 1.109).

Campus Safety Satisfaction

In general, the students were content with the safety precautions on campus. They reported feeling safe on campus during the night (M = 3.84, SD = 1.212) and expressed satisfaction with the campus security measures (M = 3.78, SD = 1.012) and the visibility of the security personnel (M = 3.61, SD = 1.130). Overall, campus safety measures were well-received, while satisfaction with how campus security offices address safety concerns raised by students was slightly lower (M = 3.39, SD = 1.085).

Faculty Integration

The students expressed general satisfaction with faculty integration. They reported satisfaction with the connectedness with the faculty on campus (M = 3.34, SD = 1.090), academic advice received (M = 3.44, SD = 1.128), and lectures from professors in classes (M = 3.80, SD = 0.884). Additionally, the students were satisfied with the overall level of faculty integration in their academic experience (M = 3.63, SD = 0.910) and communication channels used by the faculty to share important information (M = 3.75, SD = 1.008).

Individual Commitment

The students showed a strong dedication to achieving their personal objectives. They expressed determination to overcome obstacles (M = 4.23, SD = 0.920), stay focused on their academic goals (M = 4.15, SD = 0.811), and take advantage of all available resources to enhance their learning experience (M = 3.81, SD = 1.125) in their first year of college.

Institutional Commitment

The students viewed their institution's dedication to their success as generally positive. They agreed that their institution effectively communicates and collaborates to address barriers to student persistence (M = 3.49, SD = 1.085), values academic success (M = 3.82, SD = 1.026), and provides resources for academic success (M = 3.90, SD = 0.979). The students felt valued by their institution and believed that it actively seeks student feedback regarding programs and services (M = 3.60, SD = 1.087). The students also agreed that their institution is committed to supporting student success and persistence (M = 3.84, SD = 1.006). The majority of the students indicated a high likelihood of recommending their institution to future students (M = 3.90, SD = 1.107).

Student Persistence

The findings reveal that the majority of the students (M=3.10, SD=1.265) already have a target for success at a particular age. On the other hand, there is also a considerable proportion of students (M =2.64, SD=1.172) who reported preferring to take a fluid approach to life without a predefined goal, indicating a diverse range of goal orientation among students.

On task completion and determination, the students generally exhibited a high level of decisiveness regarding post-graduation goals (M=3.96, SD=0.993) as well as a strong determination to complete tasks (M=3.90, SD=1.020) and a tendency to finish school assignments (M=4.00, SD=1.083). However, the students also reported challenges in completing daily tasks according to plan (M=3.29, SD=1.151), suggesting potential difficulties in time management and task prioritization.

Furthermore, the students expressed concerns regarding two key areas: unrealized future possibilities (M=3.91, SD=0.919) and the impact of unachieved dreams on their mindset (M= 3.69, SD=1.086). This anxiety is reflected in their tendency to worry about failing (M=3.43, SD=1.144) and their uncertainty about how to overcome this worry (M=2.94, SD=1.264).

The students show resilience in the face of these obstacles by actively reviewing their daily actions (M=3.69, SD=1.050) and creating daily routines to help them achieve their goals (M= 3.59, SD=0.988). Additionally, they have a strong inclination towards actively seeking out an atmosphere that is favorable for completing tasks (M=4.12, SD=0.952), suggesting that they are proactive in making their study space as optimal as possible.

Examining Reliability with Cronbach's Alpha and Convergent Validity with AVE

To ensure the questionnaire data accurately reflects the intended constructs, Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess its internal consistency and reliability. This statistical test provides a measure of how closely related the items within a scale are, indicating the extent to which they capture a single underlying concept.

A high Cronbach's Alpha value suggests that the items are measuring the same construct consistently. The analysis yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient exceeding 0.700, signifying a strong level of internal consistency within the data. This finding strengthens the validity of the data for subsequent factor analysis, a technique used to identify underlying factors that explain the relationships among the measured variables.

Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was examined. The AVE reflects the amount of variance in an observed variable that can be attributed to its underlying construct, with values greater than 0.5 considered acceptable. The analysis revealed minimum and maximum AVE values that both meet this threshold (0.5), indicating that the constructs being measured account for a sufficient amount of variance in the observed variables. These findings mean that the measures successfully capture the intended constructs.

Table 4.4. Cronbach's alpha and AVE

	Cronbach's alpha	**Average variance extracted (AVE)**
Academic integration and preparedness	0.737	0.646
Campus safety satisfaction	0.873	0.662
Faculty integration	0.772	0.688
Individual commitment	0.702	0.626
Institutional commitment	0.911	0.695

	0.897	0.579
Social integration and belonging	0.897	0.579
Student financial status	0.925	0.928
Student persistence	0.79	0.705

KMO & Bartlett Test

The data validity and sampling consistency were tested further by using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's tests. This test is used for measuring the adequacy of the sampling, where its value must be more than 0.5 in order to proceed with an adequate factor analysis (Hair *et al.,* 1998). As table 4.5 below shows, the KMO test value is 0.833 and the value of the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is <.001, which is highly significant. This indicates that its probability is less than 0.05 which implies that the correlation matrix produced by this data is not an identity matrix and therefore is appropriate for factor analysis.

Table 4.5: KMO & Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.833	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square		3253.309
	df		528
	Sig.		<.001

Hypothesis Analysis

This section analyzes the hypotheses formulated to investigate the relationships between various factors and their potential influence on student success. The analysis utilizes a series of statistical tests to determine the strength and significance of these relationships.

The table presented summarizes the key findings for each hypothesis (H1-H7). Each row corresponds to a specific hypothesis, and the analysis related information are provided.

Table 4.6. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard dev. (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Hypothesis result
H1 Student financial status -> Individual commitment	0.085	0.087	0.075	1.132	0.257	Not Supported
H2: Academic integration and preparedness -> Individual goal commitment	0.362	0.369	0.076	4.756	0	Supported
H3: Social integration and belonging -> Individual commitment	0.298	0.307	0.058	5.148	0	Supported
H4: Campus safety satisfaction -> Institutional commitment	0.269	0.278	0.069	3.894	0	Supported
H5: Faculty integration -> Institutional commitment	0.58	0.576	0.067	8.695	0	Supported
H6: Individual commitment -> Student persistence	0.395	0.402	0.085	4.632	0	Supported
H7: Institutional commitment -> Student persistence	0.131	0.135	0.09	1.463	0.143	Not Supported

H1 evaluates whether, if their financial status is high, the student's individual commitment to student persistence increases. The results revealed that student financial status has an insignificant impact on their persistence (B= 0.085, t = 1.132, p = 0.257). H1 is not supported.

H2 evaluates whether, if their academic integration and preparedness is high, the student's individual commitment to student persistence increases. The results revealed that

academic integration and preparedness has a significant impact on student persistence (B = 0.362, t = 4.756, p = 0). H2 is supported.

H3 evaluates whether, if social integration and belonging increases, an individual's commitment is higher. The results revealed that social integration and belonging has a significant impact on student persistence (B = 0.298, t = 5.148, p = 0.0). H3 is supported.

H4 evaluates whether, if the level of campus safety increases, a student's perception of institutional commitment increases. The results revealed that campus safety has a significant impact on the in-person customer experience (B = 0.269, t = 3.894, p = 0). H4 is supported.

H5 evaluates whether, if faculty integration is high, a student's perception of institutional commitment increases. The results revealed that faculty integration has a significant impact on student persistence (B = 0.58, t = 8.69,5 p = 0). H5 is supported.

H6 evaluates whether, if a student's individual commitment increases, the impact on the student's persistence is greater. The results revealed that the student's individual commitment has an insignificant impact on student persistence (B = 0.395, t = 4.632, p = 0). H6 is supported.

H7 evaluates whether, if the student's perception of institutional commitment is high, the impact on the student's persistence is higher. The results revealed that ICC status has an insignificant impact on student persistence (B = 0.131, t = 1.463, p = 0.257). H7 is not supported.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

This study highlights the importance of considering multiple factors while addressing student persistence, suggesting the necessity for a holistic and comprehensive approach. By understanding the significance of academic integration, social integration, and academic preparedness, university leaders can design and implement targeted interventions to enhance student commitment and improve overall persistence rates. As obtaining an undergraduate degree contributes to personal and community wealth, it is vital for institutions and policymakers to focus on strengthening graduate students' personal factors to reduce attrition and enhance persistence.

The study also revealed that financial status does not significantly impact student persistence, suggesting that financial support alone may not be enough to support student retention. Instead, universities should focus on providing resources and support to help students integrate academically and feel prepared for their coursework. This support may involve offering academic advice, study skills workshops, and other forms of academic aid. Social integration and belonging play a crucial role in student persistence, as students who feel socially integrated and have a sense of belonging to their university are more likely to be committed to persisting in their studies.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating graduate students into the academic and social systems of their college in order to promote persistence. By understanding these factors, universities can better support their students and improve their students' commitment to their studies.

Limitations

One of the key limitations of this study is the number of students who did not persist and their lack of knowledge about their post-dropout decisions. This study only relied on the self-reported responses of students, which can be problematic, as students may not always provide truthful or complete information. Moreover, the sole reliance on students' self-reported responses can lead to a limited understanding of the factors that contribute to students' decision to drop out. Without a deeper understanding of students' post-dropout plans and experiences, it is difficult to accurately address their issues and develop effective strategies for remedy and prevention. It is important for researchers to consider alternative methods and sources of data to overcome these limitations and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Implications of the Research

Based on these findings, several recommendations are made. It is important for university leaders to regularly assess and evaluate the impact of their initiatives on student persistence. This assessment can be conducted through surveys, focus groups, and data analysis. Such an ongoing assessment will enable institutions to identify areas for improvement and make informed decisions regarding resource allocation.

This study found that students who are academically prepared to take college-level coursework at a university are more likely to persist beyond the first year. Universities should offer thorough orientation programs for new students to help them transition smoothly into academic life. These programs can include information about academic expectations, campus resources and support services. It is imperative that students resolve their academic and transition issues early in the first year in order for underprepared students to be successful in higher education.

Below are recommendations for implications and research for higher education institutions, inclusive of technology suggestions.

1. Facilitate social belonging: One solution to address student persistence in terms of social belonging is to create a sense of community on campus. Universities can implement orientation programs that help incoming students connect with their peers and build relationships. Additionally, under mentorship programs, pair new students can be paired with experienced upperclassmen, who can provide them with guidance and support. Creating inclusive spaces, such as student clubs and organizations, can also foster a sense of belonging among students with shared interests.

2. Aid academic preparedness: To enhance academic preparedness, universities can provide students with resources such as academic advice and tutoring services. Academic advisors can help students create personalized plans and set realistic goals, ensuring that they are aware of the requirements and expectations of their programs. Tutoring services can assist students who need extra help in specific subjects, boosting their confidence and enhancing their understanding of the material. Offering study skills workshops and time management seminars can also empower students to develop effective strategies to attain academic success.

Technology Recommendation: Provide automated goal setting and milestone tracking with GenAI which can help students set academic and career goals, break them down into actionable steps, and track their progress on an online platform. Provide the student the ability to set milestones and regularly reviewing their progress, students can stay focused and motivated on their academic and career objectives.

3. Ensure student safety on campus: Universities should have comprehensive security measures in place, such as well-lit areas, security personnel, and emergency response systems. Regular safety awareness campaigns and trainings should also be conducted to educate students about their rights and responsibilities regarding personal safety. Additionally, providing mental health support services and counseling resources on campus can help students feel safe and well-supported during their time at university.

4. Ensure faculty integration: To address faculty integration, universities can encourage meaningful interactions between professors and students. Creating smaller class sizes and implementing discussion-based learning formats can foster a more supportive environment where students can engage with faculty members. Additionally, universities can organize informal gatherings, such as departmental meet-ups and faculty–student lunches, to provide opportunities for students to interact with professors outside the classroom. Building strong relationships with faculty members can enhance student engagement and instill in them a sense of belonging within the academic community.

5. Support individual commitment goals: Recognizing and supporting students' individual commitment goals is crucial for their persistence. Universities can offer career counseling and internship placement services to help students align their academic goals with their future career aspirations. Providing funding opportunities, such as scholarships and grants, can also alleviate the financial burden on students and help them stay committed to their education. Moreover, universities can establish online platforms for students to set personal development goals and track their progress. Universities can also host workshops on goal setting, leadership development, and personal growth to support students holistically throughout their journey in higher education.

Tech recommendation: Provide personalized academic guidance with Generative AI by providing tailored advice on course selection, major selection, and academic planning based on a student's interests, skills, and goals. By analyzing a student's academic performance and career aspirations, AI can suggest the most suitable academic pathway for them. This technology can also provide information and insights about various career paths, industries, and job market

trends. It can help students easily find and explore different career options that align with their interests and strengths and provide guidance on the necessary skills and experiences required for those careers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by implementing the recommendations outlined above, institutions can create a positive and supportive environment that fosters student persistence and, ultimately, contributes to the overall success of both individual students and the institution as a whole. The findings suggest that, in order to promote academic persistence, students must possess self-directed learning attitudes as well as positive academic and social experiences at their university. This suggestion indicates that institutions should prioritize providing academically challenging programs, supportive faculty, and quality academic services to foster student persistence.

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VERONICA A. LOTKOWSKI, STEVEN B. ROBBINS, RICHARD J. NOETH. The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention (2004)

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Exploratory Factor Analysis

	Academic Integration & Preparedness	Campus Safety Satisfaction	Faculty Integration	Individual Goal Commitment	Institutional Commitment	Social Integration and Belonging	Student Financial Status	Student Persistence
AIP_Q16	0.802	0.207	0.219	0.317	0.307	0.091	-0.063	0.35
AIP_Q17	0.765	0.106	0.203	0.267	0.286	0.236	-0.13	0.334
AIP_Q18	0.843	0.141	0.263	0.449	0.245	0.368	-0.039	0.44
CS_Q36	0.186	0.742	0.298	0.283	0.285	0.108	-0.061	0.024
CS_Q37	0.23	0.874	0.294	0.364	0.401	0.1	-0.072	0.135
CS_Q38	0.117	0.802	0.349	0.338	0.431	0.167	-0.051	0.116
CS_Q39	0.122	0.823	0.404	0.378	0.513	0.137	0.056	0.176
CS_Q40	0.132	0.822	0.326	0.344	0.389	0.038	-0.043	0.189
FS_Q31	0.242	0.36	0.881	0.292	0.577	0.35	-0.006	0.245
FS_Q32	0.197	0.373	0.816	0.218	0.622	0.307	0.121	0.221
FS_Q34	0.289	0.295	0.788	0.202	0.511	0.257	-0.066	0.138
ICC_Q41	0.312	0.377	0.204	0.751	0.199	0.324	-0.062	0.264
ICC_Q42	0.453	0.386	0.223	0.856	0.331	0.227	0.075	0.452
ICC_Q43	0.282	0.253	0.253	0.763	0.412	0.466	0.208	0.324

INS_Q44	0.262	0.435	0.539	0.269	0.76	0.267	0.101	0.172
INS_Q45	0.303	0.48	0.593	0.392	0.846	0.389	0.093	0.254
INS_Q46	0.292	0.485	0.551	0.432	0.852	0.249	0.067	0.278
INS_Q47	0.36	0.42	0.598	0.34	0.849	0.388	0.075	0.232
INS_Q48	0.22	0.319	0.53	0.235	0.782	0.207	0.082	0.301
INS_Q49	0.25	0.406	0.641	0.345	0.904	0.333	0.115	0.22
SFS_Q13	-0.066	-0.042	0.009	0.083	0.116	0.161	0.952	0.016
SFS_Q14	-0.095	-0.027	0.038	0.114	0.093	0.164	0.975	-0.001
SIB_Q22	0.237	0.042	0.205	0.29	0.209	0.754	0.082	0.095
SIB_Q23	0.125	0.169	0.324	0.3	0.288	0.744	0.168	0.152
SIB_Q25	0.282	0.072	0.287	0.275	0.232	0.806	0.084	0.107
SIB_Q26	0.257	0.106	0.191	0.29	0.259	0.788	0.031	0.136
SIB_Q27	0.07	0.033	0.103	0.187	0.08	0.699	0.071	0.051
SIB_Q28	0.234	0.054	0.219	0.374	0.159	0.710	0.16	0.246
SIB_Q29	0.282	0.216	0.464	0.416	0.487	0.743	0.186	0.23
SIB_Q30	0.299	0.088	0.323	0.337	0.388	0.834	0.177	0.168
SP_Q58	0.458	0.175	0.206	0.387	0.252	0.193	0.023	0.806
SP_Q59	0.36	0.123	0.22	0.365	0.258	0.189	-0.023	0.867
SP_Q61	0.375	0.12	0.193	0.374	0.222	0.147	0.015	0.845

Appendix B: Instrument Survey Questions

1		Consent	
2		What is your gender?	Male or Female
3		Select one Reponses	- My College Tuition is being paid by a family member - My College tuition is funded completely by financial aid and/or scholarship - My College tuition is partly funded completely by financial aid and/or scholarship, and I am responsible for the remainder of the tuition. - I lost my financial aid after first year of college - I am responsible for paying my school tuition
4		Select the highest grade or level of school that your mother has completed	- Junior (Grade 11) - Senior (Grade 12) - High School Graduate - Some College - Graduated 2-year college - Graduated 4-year college - PHD
5		Select the highest grade or level of school your father has completed	- Junior (Grade 11) - Senior (Grade 12) - High School Graduate - Some College - Graduated 2-year college

			- Graduated 4-year college
			- PHD
6		In what year did you complete your first year of college?	- 2020
			- 2021
			- 2022
			- 2023
			- Graduating in 204
7		What is your age	- 17 or younger
			- 18-25 years of age
			- 26 or older
8		What is your current GPA (4.0 Scale).	- – 2.0
			- 2.1 – 3.0
			- 3.1 – 3.9
			- 4,0 – 4.9
			- 5.0+
9		Have you completed first year of either a 2 year or 4 year degree?	- Yes
			- No
			- In my first year of college
10		Which 2- or 4-year university are you did you attend?	- Open text
11		Do you intend to continue on to your second year of university?	- Yes
			- No
			- Unsure
12		If you do not intend to continue, which of the following describes the reason why plan to not return:	- I could not afford to return financially
			- Personal Reason (health, family situation)
			- Transferring to another institution
			- Struggled to pass classes
			- I couldn't return because I was no longer eligible
			- I did not feel that faculty/staff cared about me
			- Job Opportunity
			- Lost scholarship
			- I did not feel safe on campus
			- I did not feel belonged
			- Other
13	SFS	I am concerned about my ability to pay for school expenses?	- Strongly Agree
			- Somewhat agree
			- Neither Agree nor Disagree
			- Somewhat Disagree
			- Strongly Disagree
14	SFS	When considering the financial costs of being in college, I worry about having enough money to pay for school.	- Strongly Agree
			- Somewhat agree
			- Neither Agree nor Disagree
			- Somewhat Disagree
			- Strongly Disagree
15	SFS	The costs of each courses limit how many you take per semester.	- Strongly Agree
			- Somewhat agree
			- Neither Agree nor Disagree
			- Somewhat Disagree
			- Strongly Disagree
16	AIB	How satisfied are you with your first year's cumulative GPA?	- Extremely Satisfied
			- Somewhat Satisfied
			- Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied

| | | | - Somewhat Dissatisfied |
			- Extremely Dissatisfied
17	AIB	How satisfied are you with your academic preparedness before entering university?	- Extremely Satisfied - Somewhat Satisfied - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied - Somewhat Dissatisfied - Extremely Dissatisfied
18	AIB	How would you rate your level of motivation to excel academically?	- Extremely Satisfied - Somewhat Satisfied - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied - Somewhat Dissatisfied - Extremely Dissatisfied
19	AIB	How satisfied are you with your academic workload?	- Extremely Satisfied - Somewhat Satisfied - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied - Somewhat Dissatisfied - Extremely Dissatisfied
20	AIB	How satisfied are you with the level of academic advising services provided by the university?	- Extremely Satisfied - Somewhat Satisfied - Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied - Somewhat Dissatisfied - Extremely Dissatisfied
21	AIB	I set clear and realistic goals for myself academically in my first year of college.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
22	AIB	I socialize with your fellow classmates outside of class.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
23	AIB	I am comfortable approaching and talking to new people in my university.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
24	AIB	I have made friends with students whose age, race, interests or personal values are different than mine.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
25	AIB	I have a support network of friends or mentors on campus	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
26	AIB	I have made meaningful friends in my first year of college.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
27	AIB	I have made 1 or more relationships with another student who has made an impact on my 'personal growth'.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree

			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
28	AIB	I have made 1 or more relationships with another student who has made an impact on my 'academic growth'.	- - - - -	Strongly Agree Somewhat agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree
29	AIB	I have an overall sense of belonging in my university community.	- - - - -	Strongly Agree Somewhat agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree
30	AIB	I feel that I am involved in the university social life.	- - - - -	Strongly Agree Somewhat agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree
31	FI	How would you rate the level of satisfaction in terms with the connectedness with faculty on campus?	- - - - -	Extremely Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied Somewhat Dissatisfied Extremely Dissatisfied
32	FI	How satisfied are you with the academic advisement you received from your institution?	- - - - -	Extremely Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied Somewhat Dissatisfied Extremely Dissatisfied
33	FI	How satisfied are you with the lectures from your professors in class?	- - - - -	Extremely Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied Somewhat Dissatisfied Extremely Dissatisfied
34	FI	How satisfied are you with the overall level of faculty integration in your academic experience?	- - - - -	Extremely Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied Somewhat Dissatisfied Extremely Dissatisfied
35	FI	How satisfied are you with the communication channels used by the faculty to share important information, such as course updates, deadlines, and resources?	- - - - -	Extremely Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied Somewhat Dissatisfied Extremely Dissatisfied
36	CS	I feel safe on campus during the night	- - - - -	Strongly Agree Somewhat agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree
37	CS	How satisfied are you with campus security measures to ensure your safety?	- - - - -	Extremely Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied Somewhat Dissatisfied Extremely Dissatisfied
38	CS	I am satisfied with how visible campus security personnel are on campus	- - -	Extremely Satisfied Somewhat Satisfied Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied

			-	Somewhat Dissatisfied
			-	Extremely Dissatisfied
39	CS	How satisfied are you with how campus security office addresses and resolves safety concerns raised by students?	-	Extremely Satisfied
			-	Somewhat Satisfied
			-	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
			-	Somewhat Dissatisfied
			-	Extremely Dissatisfied
40	CS	How satisfied are you with campus security measures in place (e.g., emergency call boxes, security cameras)?	-	Extremely Satisfied
			-	Somewhat Satisfied
			-	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
			-	Somewhat Dissatisfied
			-	Extremely Dissatisfied
41	ICC	How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: " I am determined to overcome any obstacles or setbacks that may arise in my first year of college"?	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
42	ICC	I am willing to stay focused on my academic goals and avoid distractions in first year of college.	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
43	ICC	I am determined to seek out and take advantage of available resources (such as tutoring, workshops, or study groups) to enhance my learning experience in my first year.	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
44	INS	Do you agree that the institution effectively communicates and collaborates with faculty, staff, and students to identify and address barriers to student persistence?	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
45	INS	Do you agree that your institution's values your academic success and supports your efforts to persist in your studies?	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
46	INS	Do you agree that your institution provides resources and opportunities for students to develop the skills they need to succeed academically and persist in your studies?	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
47	INS	I would recommend my institution to future students based on its commitment to student success?	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
48	INS	My institution values my input and actively seeks student feedback regarding programs and services that support student's ability to persist for the next school year.	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
49	INS	How strongly do you agree with the statement: "The institution demonstrates a commitment to supporting student success and persistence"?	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree

			- Somewhat Disagree
			- Strongly Disagree
50	SP	I already have a target at what age will be a successful person.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
51	SP	I prefer to live by flowing without having a goal	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
52	SP	I prefer to live by flowing without having a goal	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
53	SP	I am worried about the possibilities in the future that have not been realized	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
54	SP	My mind is always divided when there are many dreams that interfere and have not been achieved	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
55	SP	If there are activities that are not in accordance with my ideals, then I tend to leave them	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
56	SP	Every time I have a school assignment, I finish it immediately.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
57	SP	It is very difficult to complete daily tasks according to planning	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
58	SP	I always complete school assignments.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
59	SP	I always focus on what is done to completion.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Strongly Disagree
60	SP	I am always looking for a place that is quiet in doing assignments, so that nothing can bother me.	- Strongly Agree - Somewhat agree - Neither Agree nor Disagree

				- Somewhat Disagree
				- Strongly Disagree
61	SP	I was determined to complete the task until it was finished	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
62	SP	Failures often made me despair of dreams my dream	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
63	SP	Every time I go to bed, I will think about the things I have done today.	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
64	SP	I am confused about how to overcome failure.	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
65	SP	Failure is a sign of a discrepancy between abilities and ideals	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
66	SP	I design daily activities so that my goals are achieved.	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
67	SP	I focus on predetermined goals from the beginning of entering college.	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree
68	SP	I know how to balance time to study and also enjoy other activities	-	Strongly Agree
			-	Somewhat agree
			-	Neither Agree nor Disagree
			-	Somewhat Disagree
			-	Strongly Disagree

Appendix C - Informational Letter

Hello, my name is Elizabeth Hincapie. You have been chosen at random to be in a research study about student persistence after first year of college. The purpose of this study is to further the knowledge of student perspectives in factors that influence whether a student chooses to remain in college after first year completion. If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of 150 people in this research study.

Participation in this study will take 20 minutes of your time. If you agree to be in the study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Think about your experience and time as freshman in college.

There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you for participating in this study. It is expected that this study will benefit society by furthering the knowledge of universities to learn from students to better their time during college. There is no cost to you. If you are responding to an invitation to complete the survey through an advertisement on MTurk, then you will be compensated with US $1.50 in your MTurk account after completing the entire survey on Qualtrics and copying the Qualtrics survey code to MTurk.

If you have questions while taking part, please stop and ask me. You will remain anonymous. If you have questions for one of the researchers conducting this study, you may contact Elizabeth Hincapie at (425) 295-8097.

If you would like to talk with someone about your rights of being a subject in this research study or about ethical issues with this research study, you may contact the FIU Office of Research Integrity by phone at (305) 348-2494 or by email at ori@fiu.edu. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.
Do you agree with these terms?