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ABSTRACT

The process by which the student formulates conceptions of the university and the impact of this process on the decision to persist at the university were studied with first-time Mexican American college freshmen. A multiple-subject research design--a modified analytic induction technique--was employed in order to develop a descriptive model. Phase one of the research involved interviewing persisters and nonpersisters, using an unstructured and open-ended format. The objective of the interview was to determine details of everyday social interaction through which the student is able to construct and sustain a reality of the university. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed onto a word processor, and content coded. In phase two of the research, verification and expansion of existing patterns of behavior were sought. The interview topics then become more individualized and were covered in a more structured way. The outcome of these steps was a conceptual framework for understanding persistence among Mexican-American freshmen. Examples of data that were generated by this approach are presented. Topics of the examples include the following: the student's overall environment, the student's activities within this setting, personal interactions, problems in communication, and problem-solving strategies. (SW)

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN FRESHMEN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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Introduction

Interest in the academic persistence of college students is not new. Early studies of the phenomenon were motivated primarily by the belief that college attendance and degree attainment translate into a better life. It was also argued that students can not avail themselves of what the institution has to offer and assess the usefulness of these services if they do not persist for a reasonable amount of time beyond initial entry. Thus, institutions and, particularly, their Student Affairs offices wished to document the level of persistence and to determine what might be done to promote it and to discourage the withdrawal of students.

Recent downward trends in college attendance and levels of financing have reinvigorated interest in academic persistence (Lea, Sedlacek and Stewart, 1979; Ramist, 1981). Retaining the students an institution already has is an obvious alternative to recruiting from a dwindling pool. Like maintaining the level of enrollment of new matriculants, reducing the number of students who withdraw from the institution addresses the realities of enrollment contingent funding. There is some evidence, moreover, that retention is a more cost-effective strategy than recruitment for sustaining an adequate level of student credit hours (Astin, 1975).

As the motives for studying persistence/withdrawal behaviors have changed, so too have the research regimens for pursuing such study. Although they overlap chronologically, three distinct stages in persistence research can be identified (Pantages and Creedon, 1978).

Initially, researchers strove to understand the phenomena of persistence and attrition by attempting to establish simple correlations between some measure of persistence or drop-out behavior and selected student characteristics (see, for example, Nelson, 1966). Generally, the latter were factors related to academic achievement that were presumed, on this basis, to affect rates of persistence as well. This is certainly an unrefined view of persistence behavior (Gekowski and Schwartz, 1961). Correlational studies typically focus on the characteristics of either persisting students or those that drop out; no comparison group from the other category is used (Gekowski and Schwartz, 1961). This is a fundamental weakness in their design as is the consideration of only one or two factors at a time.

The second stage of persistence research is characterized by a somewhat more sophisticated multivariate treatment of withdrawal and persistence phenomena (for example, Astin, 1975). Multiple regression analysis is the technique of preference and the factors examined include both student characteristics and institutional features. The principal contribution of research in this stage is the assumption that persistence behavior is the result of multiple factors operating concurrently. However, multiple regression cannot deal with interaction effects. Thus relationships between variables shown to be statistically related to persistence or withdrawal are left unexplored. This is a serious weakness of multivariate studies as is their lack of parsimony (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980); both are symptomatic of an underlying absence of theory (cf. Lea et al., 1979). Studies in this stage only marginally advance our understanding of persistence.

The third stage is marked by attempts to move beyond description,

to theoretical models, to explain the processes that lead to withdrawal. Tinto (1975) points out that knowing the degree to which certain variables (eg., academic ability and social status) relate to persistence or non-persistence behavior does not explain how these variables influence persistence or withdrawal decisions or why a student exhibits one form of persistence/drop-out behavior and not another. A conceptual framework permits the researcher to move beyond mere identification of the correlates of persistence behavior to an explanation of the processes that lead to persistence and withdrawal behaviors.

Tinto (1975) synthesizes much of the empirical research on persistence and borrows social theories developed for other areas of social research, primarily Durkheim's (1952) theory of suicide, to construct such a framework--a model of drop-out behavior. In the model a series of interactions between student characteristics and qualities of the institution lead to particular levels of academic integration and social integration. These, in turn, lead to particular levels of goal commitment and institutional commitment, respectively. It is the extent of the student's commitment to the goal and to the institution which underlies the student's decision to persist at an institution or to drop-out. In developing his model, Tinto was influenced by the earlier work of Rootman (1972) and Spady (1970).

Bean (1980) proposes a model of attrition which adopts Price's (1977) theory of employee turnover in business organizations. This model emphasizes the importance of organizational determinants in dropping out behavior. In particular, the concept of "pay" is highlighted. University surrogates for this concept are grades and the

student's perceptions of the quality of the institution, of his or her own intellectual development, and of the value of his or her education for future employment. Bean develops a series of propositions which state that more (or less) of a particular determinant results in a smaller or greater probability of drop-out behavior. More specifically, the model states that a particular student's background characteristics interact with particular organizational determinants to influence the student's degree of satisfaction and his or her institutional commitment: If there is a substantial lack of institutional commitment, the student may decide to drop out. Path analysis is used to test the linkages specified by the model's propositions.

Neither Bean nor Tinto presents evidence that the social theory he adopts is applicable to dropping-out behavior. For example, Bean (1980) assumes "students leave IHEs [institutions of higher education] for reasons similar to those that cause employees to leave work organizations" (p. 157). Nor is Bean's concern for theory development adequately addressed by his use of path analysis. As Bean himself points out, path analysis is an analytical method for testing a model, not for discovering one. The linkages are posed a priori and the theory developed by the researcher (Bean, 1979). Path analysis is useful for testing rather than generating theory.

The theoretical models of Tinto, Bean, and others are clear advances over the earlier, purely empirical research on persistence and attrition behavior. Their theoretical bases, broad concerns, and analytical approaches have moved this kind of research in more fruitful directions. Still, there appear to be limits on the capacity of these models to contribute to our understanding of persistence and withdrawal

phenomena. Even when evaluated on their own terms, these theoretical models have been found inadequate. Tinto's model, for example, has been tested for its predicitve ability on numerous occasions, most recently by Pascarella and Chapman (n.d.). All of these tests have found the model less than wholly satisfactory for predicting drop-out behavior. Pascarella and Chapman conclude that "perhaps a major portion of persistence/withdrawal behavior is so idiosyncratic, in terms of external circumstances and personal propensities, that it is difficult to capture it in any rational explanatory model" (p. 12). Alternatively, the assumptions on which the model is based may be inadequately grounded in an understanding of the processes involved.

Tinto (1975) emphasizes the need to understand the "processes of interaction" (p. 90) which bring individuals, over time, to varying levels of persistence, and elsewhere expresses his desire "to gain new insights into the social process of dropout from higher education" (p. 91). Yet, the kind of data on which Tinto's model is based--fixed choice responses on written questionnaires and institutional records--do no more than provide crude indices of the dynamics of this social process. Moreover, his research systematically ignores what Silverman (1972) calls the "internal logic of the situation," that is "the rules used by the participants themselves. This is because Tinto is operating within that positivist school of sociological thought where social phenomena are treated as being no different than physical phenomena, where social meanings, if addressed at all, are merely treated as an intervening variable between other social conditions and the social act (Walsh, 1972).

The present study brings new theoretical orientations and new

methods to persistence research. In lieu of logical-positivistic theories developed for other areas of social research (for example, Durkheim's theory of suicide or Price's theory of employee turnover), this study is guided by a broad theoretical orientation based on the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological perspectives in sociology. The purpose of the research is to illuminate the relationship between persistence and how, through social interaction, the student comes to interpret the university environment. In this regard, persistence is conceptualized as a process that involves the student's continuous interpretation of the meanings of the persons, things and events he encounters daily at the university. These meanings are necessarily forged out of the student's day-to-day interactions with other individuals, both within and outside of the university community. Examining the process by means of which the student formulates his concepts of the university and of himself in relationship to it has great potential for contributing to our understanding of the decision to persist or not persist.

Research Approach

Persistence researchers generally have relied on data of three types: (1) variables in records routinely maintained by administrative units of institutions of higher education, (2) information provided by students on fixed-choice questionnaires, or (3) some combination of the two. Needless to say, data collected by administrative units are collected for purposes other than persistence research. Generally, fixed-choice questionnaires are administered long after the relevant

behavior has occurred, are designed and/or responded to superficially, and are returned by only a small percentage of respondents. Furthermore, survey questions tend to impose a rigid format on the study of persistence so that the broader context of student life is ignored. In any case, these data are inappropriate for discovering the process by which students construct realities of the university and of self through everday social interaction. The methods described below produce data that are grounded in the concerns and actions of students in real-life situations.

Selection of Subjects

The effectiveness of a research approach with a heavy dependence on the perceptions of the subjects is enhanced by the study of a group that is more homogeneous than a general population. Given the evidence (for example, Richardson & Attinasi, 1982) that the levels of persistence of various ethnic subpopulations are not the same, persistence may be a qualitatively different phenomenon for students of different ethnic backgrounds. Previous research, however, generally has ignored interethnic differences in persistence/withdrawal behavior. The failure to disaggregate persistence data by ethnicity is a glaring omission because, along with equality of access and equality of institutional choice, equality of retention and degree completion has been a primary goal of the equal educational opportunity policy of American higher education during the last two decades (Jensen, 1981; Leslie, 1977). Inequities in rates of persistence cannot be addressed without, in the first place, data disaggregated by ethnic status. Both the research approach and the researchers' perception of the need to study minority persistence, then, have motivated the selection of subjects for this

investigation--Mexican-American undergraduates. Two considerations underlie the selection of this minority subpopulation for study: (1) Chicanos have been particularly underserved by higher education as a whole and (2) they represent an important minority subpopulation at the Southwestern university that is the setting for this investigation.

The study population included all new freshman in Fall 1981 who registered for twelve or more credits in that semester and who identified themselves on applications as Hispanic. By selecting only "new" freshmen, the researchers limited the population to students with no previous college attendance. Selection on the variable, registration for twelve or more hours, ensured the subject's intent to be a full-time student. Previous experience indicates that virtually all individuals who identify themselves as Hispanic are Mexican-American.

Students in the study population who registered for and completed the Fall 1981 and Spring 1982 semesters and who registered for the Fall 1982 semester were defined as persisters. Students who failed to register for any of the three semesters or officially withdrew during the Fall 1981 semester or Spring 1982 semester were considered non-persisters. The time frame of the study was limited to the freshman year because persistence during the first year, a period of substantial withdrawal, appears to be qualitatively different from that in subsequent years (Rootman, 1972).

Research Design

Analytic Induction

This study uses a multiple-subject research design known as

modified analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). As an approach both to collecting and analyzing data and to developing and testing theory, it has a long history (Denzin, 1978). The procedure of analytic induction is employed when the focus of research is some specific problem, question , or issue. Data are collected and analyzed to develop a descriptive model that encompasses all cases of the phenomena.

Analytic induction has been used extensively with open-ended interviewing. Typically, the initial interviews result in the formulation of the questions or the problem rather than in specific propositional statements. As the research progresses, the developing explanation is modified to fit all new facts that arise, but the research question may be redefined (narrowed) to exclude the cases that defy explanation by the developing framework. In choosing what categories to include or exclude, the researcher is able to limit the scope of the explanation and thereby exercise control over the scope of the work.

The procedure of analytic induction insures that a variety of types of subjects are included, but it does not indicate how many, nor in what proportion, the types appear in the population. The method of sampling in analytic induction is purposive sampling. It also has been referred to as theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) because the selection of particular subjects by the researchers is based on the belief that they will facilitate the expansion of the developing theory.

Phases of the Research

The research is being conducted in two phases which are characterized by different types of data collection and analysis. In Phase I data collection and analysis is "oper" so that the data can be

examined in many different different ways. With movement into Phase II and the emergence of a framework, collection and analysis becomes more focused so that the framework can be refined and verified.

Phase I. Persisters and non-persisters are contacted and asked to participate in a conversation with the researcher. These conversations are standardized, non-scheduled interviews (Gorden, 1980). That is, they are structured only in the sense that the included questions are designed to elicit information on the basic research questions. At least initially, the exact wording of the question, the context supplied with each question, and the sequence in which the questions are asked is not pre-determined. Further, the interviews are open-ended, that is, answer categories are not provided. The intention is to have, to the extent the question/answer format allows, the student define the topics of the interview. In particular, the interviews seek the rich details of everyday social interaction through which the student is able to construct and sustain a reality of the university.

The interview has a number of advantages over the survey questionnaire for gathering the data needed for this study (Gorden, 1980). First, it provides greater opportunity for motivating the informant to supply accurate and complete information immediately. This is an important consideration for the present study given the volume of information requested and the minimal answer-structuring provided. The interview also allows a greater flexibility in questioning the informant. Given the importance of exploration and discovery, it is important that the interviewer be allowed the opportunity to pursue hunches and clues that occur during the course of the interview. Finally, the interview allows greater control over the data gathering

situation.

All interviews are audiotaped and transcribed onto a word processor. The transcriptions are open coded directly on the processor. Open coding means the content of each interview is coded into as many categories as possible. The coded transcriptions are subjected to analytic induction so that important categories (patterns) of behavior can emerge and be fully characterized.

Phase II. In Phase II of the research verification and expansion of existing categories ~~is~~ are sought. This is accomplished by moving to more scheduled and less standardized interviewing of members of the initial contrast set (persisters/ non-persisters) and of other contrast sets should these become apparent. That is, the interview topics become more individualized and are covered in a more formatted way. This change in interviewing approach is both concommitant with, and a result of, more selective coding of the data. The purpose of this phase is to verify and fully characterize patterns of behavior uncovered in the first phase. This process is comparable to Maxwell and Maxwell's (1980) "concept development" in that it involves (1) reduction, or the collapsing of categories to form more general categories, (2) selective sampling of the literature for concepts that can be compared with the data, and (3) selective sampling of the data for the purposes of developing hypotheses and identifying the properties of the main categories. This process is facilitated by the collaboration of key informants--perceptive and cooperative individuals who are willing to help the researchers analyze the findings--and by indeterminate triangulation (Cicourel, 1974). The latter refers to permitting interviewees to react to audiotapes of their own interviews or the

interviews of others, as well as to the interpretations of the researcher.

The completion of Phase II will be marked by the ~~availability~~ emergence of a well-grounded conceptual framework for understanding persistence among Mexican-American freshmen.

Some Initial Data and Interpretation

The purpose of this section of the paper is to present some examples of data that research of this kind is able to provide and to indicate its potential for illuminating persistence behavior and for providing practical information for university personnel dealing with Mexican-American freshmen.

Data Categories

The theoretical orientation of the study and analysis of the initial round of interviews suggest the following data categories.

(1) The types of people and objects that populate the individual's world:

> E.L., a persister, reports that she lives off-campus with her sister who is attending a local community college. She has a fiance but spoke little about him during our conversation. She's comes from out of town so the rest of her family lives some distance from her. She is an education major and described other education majors as "mellow", serious students with whom she feels comfortable. Her classes at the university appear to be very important to her and she went into much detail describing them.
>
> G.B., a non-persister, reports that she now attends a community college near her home, which is located in the same community as the university. She speaks at great length about her parents and, particularly, her boyfriend, who gave her conflicting signals about

attending the university. She also received advice from aunts and uncles both before and while attending the university. Initially, finding reliable transportation to the university proved to be a problem. Until just prior to enrolling in the university, she had planned to go to the community college she is now attending which she indicates is more nearly like her high school in terms of the attention and concern of the teachers.

(2) Temporal and spatial dimensions, including boundaries, of the individual's world:

In a number of cases it appears students were able to handle the "bigness" of the university by restricting the geographical sphere of their activity, in some cases to the point of remaining ignorant of the geography of the rest of the campus.

E.L. It's not like I'm at ASU. It's kind of like I'm here in this part of it because I'm in the education building all day long. So I'm just kind of here. You know, that's why I just kind of run my little circle ....

A.M. There's the engineering building, the physical science building and the classroom office building. All of my classes that I've ever had have been in those except for English which was in the Language and Literature Building. The rest have been in those three buildings. So I'm very familiar with that area but I'm not really familiar--totally with--where's the architecture building?

For both of these students there were not only physical boundaries between their particular geographical areas and the rest of the campus but apparently for them boundaries of sorts separating the students who populated the two areas:

E.L. Well, like I say, in education, everybody's so, I don't know whether the word's mellow, you know, they're not radical people. But I guess people who are going into teaching--you see a lot of soft spoken people .... You don't see a lot of the crazy people ... You don't see the punk rockers. Those aren't the kind of people that go into education ... Whereas when I was in my psychology class I even had people ditching all the time, and wild, and making remarks back to the teacher and

just a lot of things going on back and forth in class. And when I got into education people--they were serious about what they're doing.

Q. Are there different types of students, do you think, on this campus?

A.M. Yes. There's engineering students and there's people that wish they were.

But G.B., on the other hand, did not seem to be able to differentiate areas of the campus. Furthermore, there appear to be more boundaries for her at the community college than at the university. For example, she observes that university students are "sent" to college while community college students combine school with work and family responsibilities:

G.B. [referring to students at the university]: They were all from different parts of the country .... You wonder how they can afford to come. Then you find that their parents send them. Well what do their parents do that they can afford to send them? So. But different styles--the way they dress, you know, the preppy look. In the winter you're all bundled up and they're with their shorts.

[referring to community college students]: There's old people that are married and have children of their own. And students that go to school only a certain amount of hours. They will work after that.

(3) How the individual breaks down time and space, that is, what, in particular is being broken down into fine units:

G.B. went into great detail describing what happened before and after school, in particular, how she got to and from school, the means of transportation and the individuals who transported her.

G.B. The trouble was the transportation. Because it was too expensive for me to live on the campus. So I was at my aunt's--I have an aunt and uncle who live in Tempe. So I stayed there the first two days of the semester. [Laugh] But it's so quiet over there I got homesick. So I was back-- the second

> day I was back home. So I had a friend that went to high school with me and she was going with a cousin of mine, a friend of hers, and her sister. So I called her and asked her if could go with them in the morning. But that didn't work out because sometimes they wouldn't go to class. So I'd be up and my Dad would take me to my grandmother's in the morning and I'd be waiting and waiting. And they call about eight, eight fifteen and my class would be at eight forty, "We're not going today, Gina." So I'd have to--my uncle was living there when that happened so my uncle or my grandfather would take me to the terminal so I could catch the bus that left there and I would miss a class because of that. So the next semes ... you know, before the end of the semester I just told her that "I'm just going to start taking the bus." So that's what I did the rest of the year--take the bus.

When asked about a typical day in her life, L.E. immediately focused on her classes, describing what she did, whom she interacted with. Even with probing it was difficult to get her to describe the rest of her day:

> E.L. Well, say for instance, last Thursday. I have a curriculum class which I had a test in there so I can't say too much about that. But it's a pretty good class because it's mainly based on the communication in the classroom, people talking, giving them their ideas which really helps a lot for work that you're going into. And I also have a class in multicultural education which is very interesting and it just so happens last Thursday we had people from the ESL, English as a Second Language, we had 32 students coming from there from 13 different countries and we just spent the whole time talking to them and it was very interesting talking-I talked with some people from Saudi Arabia and from Japan and I was really interested in their problems they have as being a minority here and prejudice, that type of thing because we really talk about that a lot in the class. And uh, I have another class, the teaching of reading, which is really intersting and we do something kind of extra where we write to second graders as pen pals.

(4). Complexities and discontinuities.

(a) On a daily basis.

The difficulties G.B. experienced in getting to the university already have been mentioned. She also seemed to have difficulty reconciling her attendance at the university with her boyfriend's attitude:

> G.B. But um the one thing that--that when I was in high school I met my boyfriend. He was--is three months younger than I am. So he was a junior when I was a senior. So when I was going to graduate and got a scholarship to go to ASU and all that stuff he was pretty--"Oh you going to meet someone else over there. There's all kind of different guys," and all this stuff. But I told him, "No. You don't have to worry about that." But he kind of--and then we had an argument in between there and stopped talking to each other.

(b) In the course of one's life.

It appears that some students see college as part of a natural progression in their lives:

> C.L. I never thought of not coming [to college] because I really didn't know, you know, what I would do after high school and not going to school. So I thought, 'After high school comes college, after college comes work'.

> E.L. It's been decided for as long as I can remember that I was going to college.

The strong expectation of going to college may be one aspect of a larger phenomenon which we tentatively call "preparation." Other aspects of preparation appear to include:

1. modeling, that is, individuals close to the informant have preceded him or her to college.

> C.L. Well, having an older sister and an older brother and they're much older than me. So when I was in elementary [school], you know, I saw them going to college. So I guess it was just seeing them, you know, I was next to do the same thing.

> E.L. My sister was attending university at the time and another sister was attending junior college at the time. So it was just ....

2. simulation. This may be direct or indirect. Indirect simulation may be provided by a high school teacher who describes what college will be like, often contrasting it with high school:

> C.L. And he'd say, 'You think I'm easy now but wait until you get to the university. Those profs are just going to eat you alive if you're like this in class.' He goes, 'I'm very easy compared to some of those profs that you're going to meet.' You know, he's just like that. English teachers basically were the ones who encouraged college because they'd say, 'Well, you've got to learn how to write (and this and this) because when you get to English in college those classes are much harder than mine.'
>
> A.M. Well, teachers, counselors said you really have to apply yourself. Teachers at my high school.

Direct simulation is some kind of continuing experience on a college campus prior to matriculation. For example, C.L. participated in a Civics seminar for high school seniors that involved boarding on a campus for a week. A.M. took a course at the university during the summer between his junior and senior years of high school. E.L. came from out of town to visit her sister who was attending college.

An instance of lack of continuity is G.B.'s change of mind from attending a local community college to attending the university. The offer of a scholarship and the encouragement of her family caused her to relinquish her long-standing plan to enroll in the community college.

(5) Interaction, that is, with whom is the individual interacting and what is the content and intent of the interactions.

Data on the types and content of interactions are critical to this study. Many of these interactions already have been noted in

descriptions of other data categories. But let us reconsider the case of G.B.

> G.B.'s decision to come to the university was made in the context of interactions with at least three individuals or groups of individuals; her parents, other relatives, and her boyfriend. Her parents urged her to "try" the university even though her own predisposition was to attend the community college nearer her home. This exhortation was reinforced by aunts and uncles who proffered the same advice and exhibited obvious pride at having a niece who was attending the university "on scholarship." Interactions with her boyfriend must have had a contrary effect. Apparently fearing loss of her affection, he voiced his apprehension about her going to the university where there was "a different kind of guys."

(6) Problems and breakdowns in communication, either person-to-person or person-to-object.

G.B. experienced problems in communicating with at least two instructors during her second semester at the university:

> G.B. ... He said to write stuff that means something to you, you know. So I would write them and he'd say it's not, it's something that everybody's heard before and all this stuff. And then he had us write a paper one time on, uh, a quote. So I used a quote and I wrote what I thought, what it meant to me. So he gave it back to me and he said he didn't like it because--he said that I should have broken down each little section. He said you can't--because I wrote it on my friendship with Dave, my boyfriend David. And he said you shouldn't focus your paper only on your relationship with David. You should break it down into one part your Mom, another on, what did he say, an older person that you admire, then your relationship with a brother or a sister, then your final part should be about David. That upset me because he tells me I want you to do this, and I want you to do it because it means something to you. So then he would tell me, 'Oh you don't know.'
>
> But the [philosophy] professor was real, how do you say it, he used big words and was real, how do you say it, technical or something.

C.L. described a similar communication problem:

> C.L. The most hardest thing is just trying to learn their ways of teaching. You know, of how they--certain ways they try to get the point across. I'm still trying to figure that out .... It's just the way they talk ... Sometimes, professors here, sometimes they use vocabulary like they're trying to impress you.

(7) Strategies for dealing with problems, discontinuities.

It appears that some students bring with them to college a kind of "metastrategy" for dealing with problems. This is a kind of a general prescription for dealing with any dicontinuity that college causes in one's life. For example, E.L. describes how she deals with what are for her deviant student types:

> E.L. You have to open your eyes at first and look at what's around and then when you realize what's there you can close your eyes to some of things sometimes.

In other cases, the students seem to have a repertoire of strategies that may include strategies developed after arriving on the campus. For example, C.L. addressed her problem in understanding some professors' lectures by singling out in each class a person with whom she could exchange notes [literally and figuratively]:

> C.L. It's better if you pick out a friend and sit by somebody and introduce yourself and that way you make the class a lot easier .... Because, you know, they learn it different, they can explain it in their terms and you can catch on more easily and then you're not so insecure when you go in.

Implications of the Study

The results of this qualitative study of the academic persistence of Mexican-American college freshmen will have theoretical, practical and methodological implications. The results will contribute to the development of a theory of persistence based on the actions and concerns of students in real-life situations and, more particularly, on how the student constructs, through social interaction, a reality of the university and of himself in relationship to it. Present models of persistence ignore the everday social interaction of the student in favor of macrostructural perspectives; this is associated with, and a consequence of, their sole reliance on variables identified in university records and/or gathered by fixed-choice questionnaires.

The results also have practical implications for counseling of potential Chicano drop outs. As they make explicit the process by means of which the student "uses" everyday social interaction to construct a reality of the university, the results provide information that will help in designing effective retention strategies. It is not intended that the information reported in this study be used to, in some way, modify the process of reality construction by the non-persister. Instead, the information tells university personnel what process of reality construction it must accommodate in dealing with both the persister and non-persister. This information should be particularly useful to college personnel--student affairs staff, financial aid counselors, housing personnel, academic advisors--who may interact frequently with minority students.

Finally, the study will have implications for persistence research and research on university students, in general. There are presently no studies of the academic persistence of students that have utilized symbolic interactional and/or ethnomethodological perspectives. Studies of other student characteristics utilizing these perspectives (e.g., Becker, Greer and Hughes, 1968) are rare. But the few such studies we do have suggest the usefulness of social interactional approaches to research on student behavior. The present study will demonstrate the feasibility of extending these approaches to persistence research.

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