Who Enrolls in Two-year Colleges? A National Study of Price Response

by Timothy Stokes and Patricia Somers

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The authors examine the factors that influence the college choice process of two-year college students and explore the effect these variables have on the two-year/four-year college choice dichotomy, using the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) of 1995-96 and the Beginning Postsecondary (BPS) component of that survey. This study provides new insight into the influence that background characteristics, aspirations, high school experience, college experience, price and subsidy, and beginning postsecondary variables have on a student's decision to attend a two-year college as compared to a four-year institution. The study finds that ethnicity, location, high school degree attainment, educational achievement (as measured by high school GPA and ACT score), tuition and fee rates, net cost, and campus climate are the most influential variables influencing a student's decision to attend a two-year college.

Two-year colleges have become the institutions of choice for individuals who enroll in public higher education. In 2003, for example, forty-three percent of all students in public institutions attended two-year colleges (*Profile of Undergraduate Students*, 2007). The two primary factors that influence students' decisions to enroll in a two-year college are cost and location (Somers, Bauer, Haines, Keene, Pfeiffer, McCluskey, Settle, & Sparks, 2006); however, there may be other significant factors to consider when assessing a student's college choice decision.

Two-year colleges assert that they are mechanisms of access for many individuals who would not otherwise pursue higher education, and this is an important component in their mission. The diversity of the student population is a powerful market force that is positively affecting community colleges.

Research on the college decision-making process focuses almost exclusively on the factors that influence the "college choice" of students attending four-year colleges and universities. This research has led to the development of theoretical models that explain the decision-making process of students seeking four-year bachelor's degrees. No attempts have been made to use the existing "models of choice" to determine whether the factors influencing college choice of students attending four-year colleges and universities also pertain to students attending two-year colleges.

This study examines factors that influence whether students choose to attend a two-year college. We developed a model that may be applied to two-year college choice, explored the factors that significantly influence college choice among students attending two-year colleges, and examined how these variables are associated with a student's decision to attend a two-year college versus a four-year institution.

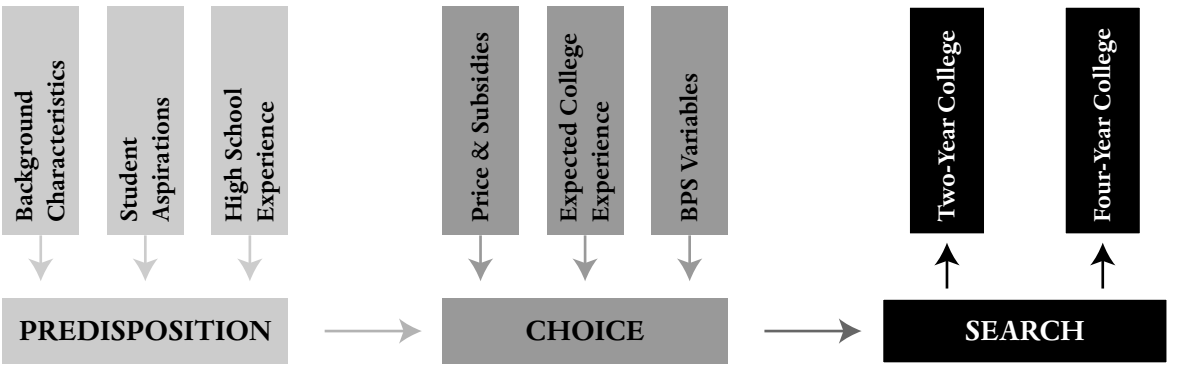
Review of Literature

Much of the research on student decision-making employs economic and sociological theoretical frameworks to examine the phenomenon of college choice (Hearn, 1984; Jackson, 1978; Tierney, 1983). These frameworks have been used to develop conceptual models of the choice process.

There are three strands of theoretical approaches used to examine the college choice process. These three strands produce 1) economic models, 2) status-attainment models, and 3) combined models.

We chose a combined model for our study. The factors most commonly associated with a comprehensive college choice model include student background characteristics (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982), aspirations (Chapman, 1984; Hossler et al., 1989; Jackson, 1982), educational achievement (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982), social environment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), financial variables (St. John, 1990, 1991; Somers, 1993), net cost (Chapman, 1984; St. John & Starkey, 1995), institutional climate (Chapman, 1984; Hanson & Litten, 1982), and institutional characteristics (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler et al., 1989).

We use the comprehensive college choice model shown in Figure 1:



This model is based on a three-stage college choice process. It includes all of the previously identified factors that have been found to influence the college choice process.

Research Questions

We examine factors that influence the two-year college choice process of students using the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, 1996 (NPSAS:96) and the Beginning Postsecondary Survey (BPS) datasets. The following questions guided this study:

- What factors (background, aspirations, high school experiences, college experiences, price and subsidies, and Beginning Postsecondary Survey variables) significantly influence the decision to enroll in a two-year college?
- How much variance do these factors explain in the two-year/four-year choice dichotomy?

Method

Data

The source of data for this analysis is the restricted version of the National Postsecondary Aid Study (NPSAS:96), a nationally comprehensive sample of students enrolled in postsecondary education in 1995-96. Included in NPSAS:96 is a sample of first-time postsecondary students (of all ages) who make up the Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) longitudinal study cohort.

Sample

The total number in the sample for this study is 6,351: 1,814 students who chose a two-year college and 4,537 students who chose a four-year college. Caucasian students comprise 68 percent of the two-year college sample and 73.4 percent of the four-year sample. African American students comprise 14.2 percent of the two-year college sample and 10.4 percent of the four-year college sample, while Latino students make up 12.4 percent of the two-year sample and 8.4 percent of the four-year college sample. All other ethnic groups comprise 5.5 percent of the two-year sample and 7.4 percent of the four-year sample.

In terms of gender, 45.8 percent of the two-year college sample is male and 45.4 percent of the four-year college sample is male. Thus, females comprise a majority of both the two-year and four-year sample.

Most of the students are under the age of 22, comprising 74.8 percent of the two-year sample and 96.7 percent of the four-year sample. Those over 22 comprise 23.1 percent of the two-year sample and 3.3 percent of the four-year sample.

Model

The model for this study examines the nexus between student background characteristics (17 variables), student aspirations (2 variables), high school experiences (9 variables), college experience (8 variables), price and subsidies (8 variables), debt load (4 variables), and BPS/choice questions (5 variables) (Table 1).

Statistical Method

The statistical method consisted of two steps. First, an ANOVA was performed on the 88 BPS/college choice variables to determine which variables were a best fit for the model. Five variables were significant (.05) for both two- and four-year students. The second step in the statistical method was to perform a logistic regression analysis with the complete model (Table 2). The outcome variable was whether or not a student enrolled in a two-year college. Because of the large sample size, we set our significance level of $p = .001$ (see Thomas & Heck, 2001 for further consideration of working with large databases).

Whether a student chooses a two-year or a four-year college, the outcome is dichotomous: either yes or no (coded as 1 or 0). The resulting graph of the relationship is not a straight line, but a curved line bounded by 0 and 1. Regardless of the values of the constants β_I or the variables X_I, this equation still results in values between 0 and 1 because of the properties of the natural logarithm. The value P can also be thought of as a probability measure that the outcome variable will be 1 (yes). This is precisely what a dichotomous model requires (Cabrera, 1994; Menard, 1995).

Results

Two research questions are the focus of this inquiry. Based on the findings of this study, the results for each question are addressed separately.

Question One

What factors (background characteristics, aspirations, high school experience, college experience, price and subsidies, debt variables, and Beginning Postsecondary Survey variables) significantly influence the decision to enroll in a two-year college? Of these factors, 27 are significant at the $p \leq .001$ level.

Background. In the background category six variables are significant. Two ethnicity variables are significantly associated with the two-year choice decision. These variables indicate that Latino students and students listing their ethnicity as "other" are less likely to choose a two-year college. Only one dependency variable is significant, indicating that independent students are more likely to choose a two-year college. Along the same lines, one variable pertaining to parent's educational attainment is significant; students whose fathers had no higher education are more likely to attend a two-year college. Also in the background category, two location variables are significant. Students who choose a college that is over 100 miles from home are less likely to attend a two-year college while students who choose a college less than 30 miles from home are more likely to attend a two-year college.

Aspirations. In the aspiration category, degree expectation is the only variable that is significant in the two-year/four-year choice dichotomy. Students whose educational goal is an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree are more likely to choose a two-year college than those students aspiring to an advanced degree.

High school experience. Seven variables in the high school experience category are significant. Students with no high school degree are more likely to attend a two-year college when compared to students who completed a GED or a high school certificate program. Students who obtain a regular high school degree are also more likely to attend a four-year college.

High school achievement as measured by a student's GPA is also a variable associated with two-year college choice. Students whose GPA is between 1.75 and 2.75 are more likely to choose a two-year college when compared to students with slightly higher or lower GPAs. Similarly, a student whose ACT score is below 21 is more likely to attend a two-year college while a student whose ACT score is above 21 is less likely to chose a two-year college.

College experience. Five variables in the college experience category are significant. A college's reputation is significant in the choice dichotomy. A student is more likely to choose a two-year college if it is perceived by the student to have a good reputation.

Residency, i.e., living on or off campus, is also significant in the choice decision. Students wanting to live on campus are less likely to choose a two-year college while students wanting to live off-campus are more likely to attend a two-year college.

Although the amount of time a student works is statistically significant for all students, those who work full-time (more than 35 hours a week) are somewhat more likely to choose a two-year college than those who work part-time or do not work.

Price and subsidy. Five variables in the price and subsidy category are significant. Students who pay high (≥$4,054) and medium (between $1,959 and $4,053) tuition and fees are less likely to attend a two-year school, while students who pay low (≤ $1,958) tuition and fees are more likely to choose a two-year college.

Two net cost variables are significant. Students who have a high net cost of attendance (>$3,206) are less likely to choose a two-year college. Similarly, students who have a low net cost of attendance (<$1,697) are also less likely to choose a two-year college.

Debt variables. None of the debt variables is significant in the two-year/four-year choice dichotomy.

BPS variables. Three of the BPS variables are significant to the choice dichotomy. Two of the BPS climate variables are significant, including the ability to meet with an academic advisor and talk to a faculty member outside of class. Students who found these important are less likely to choose a two-year college.

Only one of the BPS goal variables is significant to the college-choice dichotomy. Students who indicate that the ability to succeed in a career is an important factor in the choice decision are more likely to choose a two-year college.

Question Two

How much variance do these factors explain in the two-year/four-year choice dichotomy?

The results of the regression analysis reveal highly significant associations among some of the factors examined in this study and a student's decision to enroll in a two-year college. While the presumption of cost and location are two factors that typically influence a student's decision to enroll in a two-year college, this study finds that there are other factors that significantly influence the college choice decision.

Background. One of the background characteristics that significantly influence the two-year college choice decision is ethnicity. Both the Latino sample and the category including all other ethnic groups besides Caucasian and African-Americans are negatively associated with the two-year choice decision. These minority groups are less likely to choose a two-year college over a four-year college.

In addition, females are 2.8 percentage points less likely to attend a two-year college than males. Independent students are 8.4 percentage points more likely to choose a two-year college versus a four-year college.

With the belief that location is important in the two-year college choice decision, distance from home is a significant factor. Students who travel more than 100 miles from home are 7.1 percent less likely to be attending a two-year college while students traveling less than thirty miles from home to attend college are 3.9 percent more likely to attend a two-year college.

High school experience. Educational achievement has long been a factor in college choice research (Blau & Duncan 1967; Parsons, 1959; Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969; Sewell & Shah 1978). This study suggests that students who possess a high school diploma are 11.7 percentage points more likely to attend a four-year college than a two-year college. In addition, students who do not hold a high school diploma are 18.2 percentage points more likely to attend a two-year college than a four-year college. Thus, the notion that two-year colleges offer expanded access to students who traditionally would not or could not attend college is confirmed by this research.

Furthering this notion that higher educational achievement equates to a higher, more selective college going rate, students who reported having taken an advanced placement exam are 25.4 percentage points less likely to attend a two-year college.

College experience. In this category, a student's desire to live on or off campus is the most influential factor on two-year college choice. Students who want to live on campus are 23.8 percentage points less likely to attend a two-year college. On the other hand, students who want to live off-campus are 16.4 percentage points more likely to attend a two-year college than those wanting to live on-campus.

Price and subsidy. The influence of tuition and fees is significant in this study. High tuition (>$4,054) has a negative impact on the two-year choice decision. Students who pay high tuition and fees are 17.5 percentage points less likely to attend a two-year college. Students who pay tuition between $1,959 and $4,053 are 31.7 percentage points less likely to choose a two-year college, and students who pay low tuition (<$1,958) are 16.3 percentage points more likely to choose a two-year college.

Along the same lines, students who pay a high net cost (tuition and fees minus subsidies >$3,206) are 17.5 percentage points less likely to choose a two-year college, while students who pay a low net cost (tuition and fees minus subsidies <$1,697) are 6.1 percentage points more likely to choose a two-year college.

BPS variables. Of the BPS variables, academic advising is the most influential on two-year college choice. Similar to the findings for Question One, a student who wishes to meet with an advisor about academic plans is six percentage points less likely to choose a two-year college. This factor suggests that students who place a high priority on traditional academic advising and mentoring are more likely to attend a four-year college (Hossler, Schmit et al. 1999).

Discussion

The finding regarding racial and ethnic background is surprising and contrary to expectations. While few college choice models have been applied to two-year college choice, the notion that two-year colleges are the colleges of choice for most minority groups is not substantiated by this study. One explanation for this finding may be that these minority groups continue to be underrepresented on college campuses at both two-year and four-year colleges. Moreover, college campuses have not fully realized the impact of newly passed anti-affirmative action measures on the college choice process or the college-going rate of minorities, which might affect minority college choice in the future.

Likewise, the finding regarding student's gender runs contrary to the expectation one would have about two-year colleges becoming the portals of access for higher education.

The finding regarding independent students, on the other hand, was anticipated. This relates to the notion that two-year colleges are more desirable to independent students who may be more price-conscious and have fewer opportunities to devote to full-time study at a four-year college. In addition, independent students often have more factors influencing their college choice process than dependent students have.

The finding concerning location affirms the idea that this is an important consideration in the two-year college choice decision.

In regard to educational achievement in high school, the findings support the idea that higher achievement in high school points to a greater likelihood that a student will attend college. Related to this, the findings support the notion that students who demonstrate higher educational achievement are less likely to choose a two-year college and are more likely to choose more selective, academically prestigious institutions.

Findings concerning price and subsidy confirm that students who choose a two-year college are extremely price conscious and that financial variables often figure in their decision-making process.

Summary

Thirty-two variables in this study significantly influence the two-year college choice decision at the $p \leq .005$ level. The most notable factors increasing the likelihood that a potential student will choose a two-year college are dependency status, educational achievement, employment intensity, price and subsidy, and the BPS variables. Students who are price conscious and have fewer resources available for college are more likely to choose a two-year college. The notion that two-year colleges are portals of access for many who could not or would not attend college because of price constraints is confirmed by the data in this study. In addition to price and net cost, a student's commitment to complete high school, moderate achievement in high school, lower achievement on standardized admissions tests, desire to live off-campus, independent status, and desire to hold a job while attending school make a student more likely to choose a two-year college.

Conversely, a student ethnicity of Latino, desire to live on campus, ability to pay high tuition and fees, paying a high net cost to attend, obtaining high educational achievement in high school and on standardized admissions tests, and the desire to meet with an advisor about academic plans are negatively associated with a student's likelihood of choosing a two-year college.

Implications for Further Research

To better understand the two-year / four-year college choice process, a longitudinal study would reveal whether certain variables hold constant over time or whether and to what extent governmental and institutional policies may impact the two-year college choice decision.

Other questions may also be explored in this regard. Do affirmative action court decisions influence whether minorities choose a two-year college over a four-year college? Do federal financial aid policies influence the role that price and subsidy variables play in the decision to enroll in a two-year college?

In addition, the application of the existing models of choice (Chapman, 1984; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Hanson & Litten, 1982) to the two-year college choice decision should focus on which variables influence the different stages of the choice process. Use of a path analysis or structural equation modeling (LISREL) could further isolate those variables that influence each stage of the decision-making process.

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Table 1: Model Specifications and Variable Coding Scheme

Variables/Factors	Variable Name	Coding	Reference Criterion
Background Characteristics			
Ethnicity	African American	0=no 1=yes	Compared to Caucasian students
Ethnicity	Latino	0=no 1=yes	Compared to Caucasian students
Ethnicity	Other	0=no 1=yes	Compared to Caucasian students
Gender	Female	0=no 1=yes	Compared to male students
Age	Under 22	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students between 22 and 30
Age	Over 30	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students between 22 and 30
SES	Low income – less than $30,000	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with medium income
SES	High income – greater than $50,000	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with medium income
Dependency	Independent for financial aid	0=no 1=yes	Compared to dependent students
Marital status	Married	0=no 1=yes	Compared to single students
Mother's Educational Attainment	Higher education experience	0=no 1=yes	Compared to no higher ed experience
Father's Educational Attainment	Higher education experience	0=no 1=yes	Compared to no higher ed experience
Disability	Have any disability	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students without disabilities
Parent's Choice	Parent's higher education choice	0=no 1=yes	Selection variable
Counselor's Choice	Counselor's higher education choice	0=no 1=yes	Selection variable
Distance from Home	Distance=Low 0-30 miles	0=no 1=yes	Compared to medium distance from home
Distance from Home	Distance=High > 100 miles	0=no 1=yes	Compared to medium distance from home

Aspirations

Aspirations	College degree expected	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with no aspirations for college degree
Aspirations	Advanced degree expected	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with no aspirations for college degree

High School Experience

High School Degree	No high school degree	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with a high school degree
High School Degree	GED or Certificate	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with a high school degree
ACT Score	Missing	0=no 1=yes	Missing cata
ACT Score	High = 21 or greater	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students less than 21
AP Test Taken	AP scores reported	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with no AP Scores Reported
Reputation	Good reputation	0=no 1=yes	Selection variable
Institution	Private	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students attending a public institution
GPA	Low GPA= less than 1.75	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with average GPA
GPA	High GPA= 2.75 or more	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with average GPA
Degree Type	Non-degree seeking	0=no 1=yes	Compared to certificate seeking students
Degree Type	Degree seeking	0=no 1=yes	Compared to certificate seeking students
Residency	Live on campus	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students living off campus
Work	Work full-time = 35 or more hours	0=no 1=yes	Compare to students not working full-time
Attendance Pattern	Full-time	0=no 1=yes	Compared to part-time students
Remediation	Did the student receive remedial instruction	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students receiving no remediation
Friends Attend	Did friends attend	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with no friend at inst.

Price and Subsidies

Tuition and Fees	Tuition and fees Low =$0 - $1,958	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students paying medium tuition
Tuition and Fees	Tuition and fees High=≥$4,054	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students paying medium tuition
Grants	Total grants and scholarships	Actual amount divided by 1,000	Compared to each $1,000 increase in tuition current year
Loans	Total loans including plus loans current year	Actual amount divided by 1,000	Compared to each $1,000 increase in tuition
Work-study	Total work-study award – current year	Actual amount divided by 1,000	Compared to each $1,000 increase in tuition
Net Cost	Tuition minus grants and loans: Low = ≤$1,697	0=no 1=yes	Compared to medium net cost
Net Cost	Tuition minus grants and loans: High = ≥$3,206	0=no 1=yes	Compared to medium net cost

Debt Load

Debt Threshold	Low debt – less than $3,000	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with no debt
Debt Threshold	Medium debt – more than $3,000 and less than $7,000	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with no debt
Debt Threshold	High debt – more than $7,000	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students with no debt

Beginning Postsecondary Survey (BPS)

Climate – Friends	Went places with friends during first semester	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students who did not go places w/friends
Climate – Plans	Discussed plans with advisor about career	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students who did not meet with advisor
Climate – Talk	Talked with faculty outside of class	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students who did not speak with faculty
Goal – Career	Succeed in career	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students whose personal goal was not to succeed in a career
Satisfaction	Satisfied with intellectual growth	0=no 1=yes	Compared to students who were not satisfied with their intellectual growth

Table 2: ANOVA F-statistics of significant BPS factors

BPS Variables		F-Statistics
BPS Climate		
	Go places with friends	68.492
	Meet with advisor	67.089
	Talk with faculty outside of class	67.899
BPS Goal		
	Succeed in career	31.733
BPS Satisfaction		
	Satisfied with intellectual growth	24.112

Table 3: Effect Sizes for 1996 Two-Year and Four-Year Sample

Background	Beta Coefficients	Delta P
African American	0.1480	0.0227
Latino*	**-0.6340**	**-0.1205**
Other*	**-0.4950**	**-0.0910**
Gender – Female*	**-0.1680**	**-0.0283**
Age – 23-29	-0.2400	0.0100
Age - Over 30	-0.2000	-0.0340
High Income*	**-0.2420**	**-0.0416**
Low Income	0.0130	0.0021
Independent**	**0.6440**	**0.0842**
Married	-0.0990	-0.0163
Disability	0.3820	0.0544
Learning Disability	0.6830	0.0881
Mother with No Higher Ed Attainment	0.0970	0.0151
Father with No Higher Ed Attainment**	**0.0333**	**0.0482**
Parent's Choice	-0.1570	-0.0264
Counselor's Choice	0.6940	0.0892
High Distance from Home*	**-0.0399**	**-0.0716**
Low Distance from Home*	**0.2680**	**0.0396**

Aspirations	Beta Coefficients	Delta P
College Degree*	**1.2500**	**0.0539**
Advanced Degree	-14.603	-0.9227

High School Experience	Beta Coefficients	Delta P
High School Degree*	**-0.1061**	**-0.1176**
GED/Certificate**	**0.7880**	**0.0982**
No Degree**	**1.6170**	**0.1826**
High GPA	0.0190	0.0917
Medium GPA**	**-0.3540**	**-0.0628**
Low GPA	-0.1340	-0.0224
High ACT*	**-0.9060**	**-0.0944**
Low ACT**	**0.6510**	**0.0849**
Taken Advance Placement Exam**	**-1.8490**	**-0.2541**

College Experience	Beta Coefficients	Delta P
Good Reputation**	**-0.2500**	**0.0010**
Non-Degree Seeking	-0.1010	-0.0167
Degree Seeking	-14.6030	-0.9227
On-Campus**	**-1.7050**	**-0.2382**
Off-Campus**	**1.9020**	**0.1645**
Work Full-time*	**0.2580**	**0.0382**
Work Part-time/No Work**	**0.9250**	**0.0452**
Required Remediation*	**0.4230**	**0.0253**
Friends Attendance	0.0190	0.0030

Price & Subsidy	Beta Coefficients	Delta P
High Tuition & Fees**	**2.2580**	**-0.1750**
Medium Tuition & Fees**	**-2.0520**	**-0.3174**
Low Tuition & Fees**	**1.8750**	**0.1635**
Current Grant	-0.0420	-0.0068
Current-year Loan	0.0230	0.0037
Current Work-Study	0.1690	0.0257
High Net Cost**	**-0.6420**	**-0.1223**
Medium Net Cost	-0.3160	-0.0258
Low Net Cost*	**-0.3480**	**0.0616**

Debt Variables	Beta Coefficients	Delta P
High Debt	-13.5020	-0.9227
Middle Debt	-13.4010	-0.9227
Low Debt	-13.4920	-0.9227
No Debt	0.1880	0.0285

BPS Variables	Beta Coefficients	Delta P
BPS Climate		
Goes Places with Friends*	**-0.5750**	**-0.0438**
Meet with Advisor About Plans**	**0.1620**	**-0.0680**
Talk with Faculty Outside of Class*	**0.0600**	**-0.0424**
BPS Goal		
Succeed in Career**	**0.6150**	**0.0811**
BPS Satisfaction		
Satisfied with Intellectual Growth	0.1940	-0.0151

Model Statistics	
Sample Size	6351
Pseudo *R*2	.6490
Chi-Square	6319
Two-Year Choice Predicted	90.7%
Four-Year Choice Predicted	99.8%

**** $p < .001$, * $p < .005$**