Students' Perceptions of Their Readiness for Community College Study[*]

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Abstract

Although the drop-out problem is particularly acute at the community college, there is very little
research on student attrition that is specific to community colleges. Differences between the community
college and four-year institutions are accented by entrance requirements that are traditionally much
more rigorous at traditional colleges and universities. Less demanding entrance requirements at the
community college provide students little with which to gauge their readiness for college study. Students'
perceptions of their readiness before, and after they began studies were compared to determine the
potential for cognitive dissonance, a factor which may help explain why students drop out of community
colleges in such large numbers.

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1 Sumario en espanol

Aunque el problema marginado sea especialmente agudo en el colegio de la comunidad, hay muy poco investigación en desgaste de estudiante que es específico a colegios de comunidad. Las diferencias entre el colegio de la comunidad y tallos de instituciones de cuatro-año son acentuadas por requisitos de ingreso que son tradicionalmente mucho más rigurosos en colegios y universidades tradicionales. Los requisitos de ingreso menos exigentes en el colegio de la comunidad proporcionan a estudiantes poco con que medir su prontitud para el estudio colegial. Las percepciones de estudiantes de su prontitud antes, y después de que empezaran estudios fueron comparados para determinar el potencial para el desacuerdo cognoscitivo, un factor que puede ayudar a explicar por qué estudiantes se retiran de colegios de comunidad en tales números grandes.

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2 Introduction

Students enroll in community colleges for a variety of reasons. Some have the formal objective of a two-year Associate's degree, and some register to complete general education requirements for a bachelor's degree at some other institution (Yindra & Brenner, 2002). Others enroll for the certificate programs, vocational training, improved job skills, career enhancement, or personal enrichment opportunities that community colleges provide (Goel, 2002; Metz, 2004; Neutzling, 2003; Zhai & Monzon, 2001). The common element among community college students, whatever their educational aspirations, is a high drop-out rate.

In 2008 42% of all students entering post-secondary education in the United States registered at community colleges (Community College Facts, 2009; Measuring Up, 2008). Approximately half did not register for a second semester (Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Tover & Simon, 2003). The drop-out rate is particularly high among the academically underprepared (Grimes & David, 1999). The fact that these underprepared students register at all suggests that they may be out of touch with their readiness for post-secondary study.

Most retention research is directed at four-year colleges and universities (Halpin, 1990; Seidman, 2005; Wild & Ebbers, 2002) but retention percentages in those institutions are higher than at the community colleges and student demographics at the two institutions differ substantially. The community college population is more diverse economically and ethnically than four-year institutions (Chaves, 2006; Zhai & Monzon, 2001). Likewise, the theories based on deficiencies in the students' social and academic integration to the institution which are used to explain dropping out in bachelors and masters degree-granting institutions (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1993) may be inadequate for explaining the community college drop-out.

The college readiness literature indicates that a strong sense of identity and positive self-concept are important psychological assets for students from at-risk populations, populations much better represented in the community college than in traditional four-year institutions. In particular, the "research . . . strongly supports the importance of high expectations" among these students (Lippman, Atienza, Rivers, and Keith, 2008, p. iii).

Four-year institutions typically have test score and/or grade average requirements that serve as gate-keepers to advanced study. Students who gain access are already assured that they have at least a minimum level of the necessary academic aptitude. By design, community colleges typically avoid rigid academic qualifiers, but the inevitable result is entrants who are less well-prepared for the rigors of college work than four-year students (Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). However, lacking criteria against which to gauge their readiness for college, students' estimates of their own ability can be inaccurate.

3 Cognitive Dissonance Theory

As an alternative to inadequate integration, dropping out of the community college may be explained by cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1964). The theory maintains that when a deeply-held personal belief is

contradicted the individual is left to deal with dissonance or conflict. Those who view themselves as good students experience dissonance when they fail a test. One way to resolve the dissonance is to rationalize the result: perhaps one decides that the test is actually a poor measure of one's ability, or that had the test been on a more worthwhile subject, performance would have certainly been higher. Dissonance can also be managed by simply avoiding situations likely to produce it. If a student avoids taking a test, there is no test score to be a source of dissonance. If community college students, perhaps bolstered with a strong sense of identity and an enhanced self-concept, have unrealistic expectations about their preparation for college work, perhaps dropping out is simply a way to minimize cognitive dissonance. Evidence to support this explanation will be initial academic work that is more difficult than what the student expected.

4 Method

To analyze the possible difference between students' perceptions of their academic readiness before and after beginning community college study data were gathered from students at nine community colleges in the Central Valley of California. The 60 item, Likert-type survey was administered to 759 first time registrants one month prior to beginning the fall term, 2009 and a second time between the third and fifth weeks of instruction. The survey items related to three questions:

- Did students who entered community college feel prepared for the academic rigor of college study?
- Were there differences between their perceptions of readiness before and after their semester began?
- Is there a relationship between their perceptions of their preparedness and their inclinations to drop out?

A Wilcoxon signed ranks test was performed to determine whether there were any significant differences in students' readiness in English, Math, Science, and Social Science classes, and in the adequacy of their academic skills before and after they began study.

5 Results

The data relating to specific disciplines were separated from skills that are cross-disciplinary. Responses to the subject-specific items are in Table 1.

Changes in Perceptions of College Readiness Before and After Beginning Coursework

Subject Area	Value of z (Wilcoxon)	Significance
English	-6.274	$p = .001$
Mathematics	-5.836	$p = .001$
Sciences	-5.112	$p = .001$
Social Sciences	-6.787	$p = .001$

Table 1

Differences in students' perceptions of their readiness in the above academic areas were all statistically significant ($p < .001$). Because of the way the data were coded, the negative z values indicates that in each subject, students perceived themselves more ready for college study before classes began than they did three to five weeks into the term.

In an effort to be more specific about the areas where students felt inadequately prepared, many of the items on the survey were directed at particular kinds of academic skills and assistance but were not particular to an academic discipline. They included the following:

- General academic preparation

- Counselor assistance in college preparation
- Knowledge about financing college
- Stress management skills
- Study skills
- Reading skills
- Note-taking skills
- Essay test-taking skills
- Paper-writing skills
- Presentations skills
- College instructors' expectations

Differences in students' perceptions of their general academic skills before beginning their college studies and three to five weeks into the term are reported in Table 2.

Students Perceptions of Readiness in Particular Domains of College Study

Skill or Area	Value of z (Wilcoxon)	Significance
General Academic Preparation	-5.368	$p = .001$
Counselor Assistance in High School	-5.009	$p = .001$
Knowledge of Financing College	-3.931	$p = .001$
Stress Management Skills	-5.875	$p = .001$
Study Skills	-3.222	$p = .001$
Reading Skills	-.904	$p = .366$
Note-taking Skills	-5.162	$p = .001$
Essay Test-taking Skills	-3.927	$p = .001$
Paper-writing Skills	-3.848	$p = .001$
Presentation Skills	-.650	$p = .516$
College Instructors' Expectations	-.664	$p = .507$

Table 2

As with the Table 1 data, negative values indicate students felt more prepared before the term began than they did three to five weeks after starting. All of the differences listed here are statistically significant except for students' perceptions of their reading skills, their presentation skill, and their assumptions of what their college instructors would expect of them.

6 Discussion

Whether the focus is on specific academic disciplines or on multi-disciplinary academic skills, students' consistently down-graded their perceptions once they actually began their classes. Such an adjustment is consistent with students attempting to resolve the dissonance resulting from beliefs about their competency which were misaligned with what they encountered. To resolve the gap between perception and experience, students had to down-grade their assumptions about their competency.

As an alternative to adjusting academic readiness perceptions, another option is simply to avoid the source of the dissonance. Students who leave the institution are no longer confronted with reminders that the work is more difficult than what they expected based on their preparedness estimations. This seems particularly likely among the lowest performing students, those whom Grimes and David (1999) indicated

are least likely to register for a second semester. Festinger's (1964) cognitive dissonance offers at least one explanation of why students drop out of community colleges in such large numbers.

A tangential question relates to how to deal with the misalignment of expectations and experience. Consistent with the general trend, respondents' perceptions of what their counselors had done to prepare them for college significantly depreciated once they actually began their classes. This suggests that more effective counseling regarding what successful post-secondary study requires is a partial answer. Greater academic rigor in the secondary school may also be part of the solution.

What is clear from this study is that new community college students' expectations for what they will face are inconsistent with what they actually experience in the early weeks of study. That disconnect, and the workings of cognitive dissonance theory offer a plausible explanation for high drop rates at the community college.

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