Forces Influencing Persistence and Achievement

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We, as educators, tend to view the factors involved in students’ academic success as fortunate but somewhat nebulous and mysterious. Fifteen years of directing academic support programs have led me to a different view: we can identify the forces that produce either academic achievement and persistence or academic failure and attrition.

While it may seem a bit mechanistic to view academic success as the result of related causal forces, a force field analysis provides an excellent model for assessing academic programs. Using such a model, program planners can determine the types of students who are likely to succeed and the types of academic support services, policies, and procedures needed to produce the desired result—academic achievement and persistence. And, as we shall see, a force field analysis also helps distinguish between those forces that promote persistence generally and those that promote academic achievement, an important distinction in resource allocation.

Lewin (1951) pioneered the kind of theoretical model used here for analyzing academic forces. His model reasons that all behavior is caused, that the causes of behavior are multiple and interrelated, that these causes vary in strength and direction, and that behavior can be predicted by correctly analyzing the strength and direction of these forces. Any change or movement toward a new future is accompanied by forces that promote and impede it. Forces that push toward the fulfillment of goals are called driving forces. Forces that resist and impede change are called restraining forces. If these forces are in equilibrium, there is no movement. If restraining forces are stronger than driving forces, the situation may regress. If driving forces are stronger than restraining forces, positive change may occur. Once these forces have been identified, it is possible to discover the key to increase driving forces or decrease restraining forces to achieve a desired change. In designing academic support systems, I have applied Lewin’s model to student achievement to better understand the forces that promote or impede the fulfillment of students’ goals.

Forces Influencing the Decision to Attend College

Considerable research has been done on the decision to attend college. Findings indicate that this decision results from a complicated interaction of external and internal factors or forces (Trent, 1970). These influencing forces vary in intensity and strength from student to student, yet there is a clear pattern of external and internal forces involved in choosing to attend college.

Among the external forces that may influence students’ decisions to attend college are:

- Parents who value a college education and stress its importance
- Peers from similar socioeconomic groups who have aspirations toward college and value a college education
- Cultural values that emphasize learning, intellectual achievement, and higher education
- Information on college opportunities that explains how to gain admission and discusses financial aid, programs of study, and opportunities for intellectual and personal development at college in general and at specific colleges
Increasing Student Retention

- Teachers and counselors who have expressed confidence in a student’s potential to succeed in college
- Information on the benefits of college that examines the ways a college education will help a student clarify and reach personal goals
- Exposure to college educated people who have benefited from college and who provide role models

Internal forces that may influence students’ decisions to attend college include:

- Academic skills that make college admission and achievement possible
- Motivation to succeed and persist in academic undertakings
- Interest in gaining a college education for personal and intellectual development
- Career aspirations for which a college education is necessary
- Enjoyment of learning that allows a student to derive satisfaction from satisfying personal intellectual curiosity
- Self-confidence enough to accept the challenge of learning at the college level and adjusting to the college experience
- Values that recognize the importance of a college education
- Identification with college educated people who have functioned as positive role models

Forces Militating Against Achievement and Persistence

We must temper this analysis of the factors involved in the decision to attend college with the knowledge that nearly 40 percent of those who enter higher education never attain a bachelor’s degree. To attain such a degree a student must overcome steep obstacles and perform at the high levels demanded by colleges and universities. These obstacles and requirements include:

1. Completing institutional procedures—applying for admission, registering, enrolling in classes, filing petitions, obtaining financial aid, procuring campus housing, and so on.

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2. Selecting appropriate courses—fulfilling graduation requirements by completing 45–60 courses in proper sequence and combination.
3. Reading and analyzing college-level texts—informal surveys indicate that a college student is assigned from 24,000 to 40,000 pages of reading in courses leading to the bachelor’s degree.
4. Achieving on tests—taking and achieving on examinations, estimated by informal surveys to number from 100 to 200.
5. Completing library research and written assignments—meeting academic standards and professors’ expectations.
6. Performing in laboratories and studios and completing other out-of-class assignments—demonstrating ability and motivation and budgeting time.

These obstacles, which vary in difficulty depending on the institution and major, are formidable and call upon students’ preparation, academic skills, motivation, adjustment skills, and frustration tolerance. Clearly, students who are underprepared and have weak academic skills will encounter more frustration and need to spend more time on their studies than those who are prepared. Accordingly, those with weak motivation and adjustment skills will be less likely to overcome the obstacles that the college experience presents than those who are highly motivated and adjust easily.

The obstacles account for some of the reasons that students leave college, but they cannot fully explain poor student performance and high attrition rates. Just as there are external and internal forces that influence a student’s decision to go to college, there are external and internal forces that tend to push a student out of college or at least militate against academic success. The negative external forces can include:

- Lack of money to meet educational, living, and personal expenses
- Housing problems that make it impossible for students to find convenient and affordable housing or force them into living arrangements that interfere with their learning
In increasing student retention

- Roommate problems that interfere with learning or consume time and energy needed for academic performance
- Transportation problems that consume time and energy and create additional financial pressures on students who cannot afford to live on or near campus
- Work demands and conflicts that consume time and energy needed for achievement, particularly for those who work off campus or for those who must work long hours to meet financial obligations
- Social demands, including personal relationships, involvement in organizations, or other social demands that might be distracting and detrimental to academic achievement
- Rejection by family or friends because they do not value a college education or because they are threatened by the decision to go to college
- Discrimination by which particular ethnic groups perceive that they are discriminated against and in which certain majors cater more to one gender than the other
- Family obligations that may consume time and energy necessary for academic achievement or parents who may have difficulty letting go and thus hinder performance and persistence

In addition to overcoming institutional obstacles and other negative external forces, college students must cope with negative internal forces. In general, these negative internal forces fall into two categories: (1) self-defeating perceptions and behavior patterns, and (2) confusion or indecision. They include:

- Procrastination and other self-management problems. These self-defeating patterns consume a student’s most precious commodities: time and energy.
- Loneliness. Going to college usually results in a separation from friends and family and forces students to meet new people and adjust to a new social and physical setting. Feeling lonely is a source of discouragement and causes some college students to question their original decision to go to college.

- Inability to assert needs and seek help for problems. While learning to cope with the independence college allows and with an environment that values self-sufficiency and self-reliance, many college students fail to make their needs and problems known. If those needs and problems were addressed, students could increase their achievements and persistence.
- Self-doubt. Students, particularly during their first year, frequently doubt their ability to succeed in college; they view others as smarter, more able, or better prepared than they are. They may think: “What’s the use?” and not put forth their best effort.
- Fear of failure. This fear often goes hand-in-hand with self-doubt. There are, however, usually other factors involved: students fear that failure will cost them someone’s love or esteem.
- Fear of success. Oddly enough, some students fear success in college. They perceive that success in college could result in additional responsibilities or expectations for which they feel inadequate. Students may also fear that success in college means acculturation into a system that is antithetical to their own values and beliefs, acculturation that could result in separation from or conflict with valued friends, family members, or potential mates.
- Fear of rejection. Students may feel that both success and failure can lead to rejection. Some family members and friends may reject a student just for going to college; this may make persistence very unlikely.
- Value conflicts. Attending college produces internal value conflicts for some students. For example, students from low-income homes may experience conflict because college keeps them from working to help support their families. Some students perceive college primarily as a way to get a good job and do not see the value of a liberal arts education. Others resist the acculturation college demands.
- Career indecision. Some students who are undecided about their college major and career goals may conclude that they should not be in school because they have no direction in their lives.
Increasing Student Retention

- Boredom. Some students find the instruction they receive uninspired or unchallenging. Also, college itself may be less exciting than expected because the student is unable to find a way to become involved.

Upon entering college, students may lose contact with many of the positive external forces (parents, peers, teachers, counselors) that were originally the influences for attending college. Students may drift away from these positive forces just at the time when they must, through their own devices and with minimal external support, contend with a host of new forces that work against persistence, all the while endeavoring to meet the demands of bureaucratic procedures, classes, reading assignments, examinations, library research, and laboratory experiments. Not easily done.

Figure 1 presents a summary of those forces with which students must contend, the pressures to which students must adjust, and the obstacles which they must overcome.

Explaining Attrition or Persistence by Using the Force Field Analysis

The forces acting upon students and affecting attrition and persistence vary in intensity and in type. The intensity or strength of each force varies in magnitude from person to person and from group to group. Some students will have many, others will have few forces acting either for or against them as they strive for their degrees. Thus, when using the force field analysis scheme to analyze and predict persistence or attrition, we must take individual and group differences into account. We must also take institutional differences into account. Clearly, demands and difficulties vary from college to college; degree requirements, curricula, assignments, professors’ expectations, competition, resources, services, and general environment all vary. Thus, we must analyze both the student and the individual institution in order to predict and explain attrition rates.

This scheme assumes that all behavior is caused. Identifying the exact cause of a particular behavior (in this case attrition)
have always attended high socio-economic backgrounds.

As noted, students from low socio-economic backgrounds attain lower income and fewer college-bound students. However, the differences in academic performance and graduation rates between students from low and higher socio-economic backgrounds are significant. Higher socio-economic groups perform better on standardized tests, attend college more often, and are more likely to graduate. However, the reasons behind these differences are complex and multifaceted. We need to address these issues comprehensively to increase college attendance and improve student outcomes.
In designing specific strategies to promote persistence and academic achievement.

**Promoting Persistence and Academic Achievement**

- To increase academic support services and direct instructional changes leading to lower persistence rates and higher graduation rates.
- To increase academic persistence and achievement, and (c) to plan for planning and assessment of what is being asked. However, this scheme provides a means of measuring academic changes and the demands of academic majors. With the increased differences and the demands of academic majors, these changes provide (d) ways of modifying the instruction and performance of students, which may also be potential objectives and student resources.

**Other Influences:** The force field analysis exercise can be applied to those who were successful in terms of field analysis.

**Economic Backgrounds:**

- Admitting to college is distinct from the academic performance and academic achievement. The process aims to identify and plan for students who are more successful in terms of their performance and achievement. However, these students are often understood in different ways. They are usually unintended with the nature of college and thus either do or know what to expect in college. When students are more likely to spend more time and努力 academic skills, they tend to spend more time and effort on academic activities. These skills will need to be developed to ensure success and success. Students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have the least time and energy available to devote themselves to the least time and energy available to devote themselves.
6. A support system within the college environment which fosters persistence, retention, and self-promotion methods to foster continuous self-education, student self-management, asset development, and conflict resolution processes. It is also an end to self-education and conflict resolution processes. Consulting services can help students resolve personal and institutional barriers to effective learning.

Problems and solutions to resource allocation in the current climate of grants and loans. More accurate student organizations on college campuses help student organizations on college campuses. The need for accurate student organizations on college campuses is important. When it is not available, student organizations are critical to student persistence. Help students deal with pressure of self-esteem and anxiety.

1. Financial support that adequately fulfills basic needs.

4. Orientation activities that begin soon after admission.

2. Providing or substituting for essential resources such as

- Loans and financial aid
- Health services
- Counseling services
- Academic advising
- Library services
- Transportation services
- Housing services
- Visa services
- Student support services

3. Address and support personal experiences contributing to student persistence.

- Psychological and emotional experiences experienced by students must be considered.

5. Increasing student retention.

- Increasing student retention can promote persistence in a variety of ways, including:

  1. Individual who takes a personal interest in students and

  2. Primary focus. A hierarchy of institutional activities is described

  3. Increasing student retention in the following section.
Conclusion

Forces Influencing Persistence and Achievement

In conclusion, the chapter has presented a model for understanding the forces that influence persistence and achievement. It highlights the importance of academic support services and suggests that they are essential in helping students overcome the challenges they face.

References

[References list]


When designing academic support services, we must keep in mind that students need a way to present a model for academic achievement and that the internal and external forces leading to academic achievement are the primary factors in determining academic success. A model that recognizes the forces leading to achievement and promotes learning by identifying the areas where students need help can begin to develop support services that are effective in helping students succeed.

Process to assess performance skills on multiple-choice test (example)