

# **Exploring Internal Factors Affecting Nontraditional Graduate Students' Academic Persistence: A Mixed Method Study**

## **BACKGROUND**

Persistence is an issue of increasing importance for both undergraduate and graduate programs in light of the increasing enrollments of nontraditional students' in both programs (Kemp, 2002; Rovai, 2003a). For example, in 2014, the total enrollment for part-time students in undergraduate and graduate programs are about 38% and 43% respectively. These statistics show evidence that the U.S. is moving toward a higher proportion of nontraditional students in its postsecondary programs (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2015). Since 2002, the U.S. Department of Education has used federal money as an incentive to reward programs that work to retain students. Some of the reasons were: (a) the increase in numbers of nontraditional students and the lower retention rates of these students; (b) the increase in the number distance education programs that usually consist of nontraditional students (Borrego, 2002). Despite concerted efforts to increase retention and graduation rates of postsecondary students, in general, the percentages of the population who attained a postsecondary degree is still less than 50% (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2015). The low completion rates of nontraditional students may be a contributing factor to the low postsecondary degree percentages in the U.S.

Generally, nontraditional students have the following characteristics: being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part-time, and being employed full-time (Brock, 2010; Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996; Kim, 2002; Taniguchi & Kaufman 2005). Students with these characteristics can be vulnerable to challenges that can affect their well-being, levels of stress and satisfaction (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006), and likelihood of persisting and attaining a degree (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; Choy, 2002; Skomsvold, Radford, & Berkner, 2011).

Persistence in post-secondary education is a complex phenomenon influenced by a multitude of factors. Rovai (2003) asserted that the persistence rates of adults in postsecondary programs are often strongly related to the ability of educational programs to satisfy adult needs. Other contributing factors include challenges set by the higher education learning environment, internal and external personal factors, ability to access requisite technology, time management, and lack of support from an employer and/or family (Kemp, 2002; Quigley, 1997; Rovai, 2003).

Persistence is defined as the length of time an adult attends classes and is related to drive for course completion (Garrison, 1997; Gibson 199; Quigley, 1997). Persistence is also defined as "The behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles" (Rovai, 2002, p.1). In this study, persistence is measured by course completion according to individual course contract dates. Completers are operationally defined as students who completed their course and received an academic passing grade. Noncompleters are operationally defined as those students who (a) are nonstarters—that is, they did not commence work on their course; (b) withdrew from their course; or (c) received an academic failing grade (Bajtelsmit 1988). Thus, there are two types of course completion: successful completion is earning a passing grade in a course and unsuccessful completion is earning a failing grade in a course.

Specifically, the researchers are interested in investigating to what extent some internal factors affect nontraditional students' persistence in the programs. There are five indicators for internal factors: academic integration, social integration, quality of programs, current GPA (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993), and self-directed learning (Corno & Kanfer, 1993). Academic integration is defined as how well students integrate into a particular school and measured by grade point average (GPA). Meanwhile, social integration is defined as the need for students to develop interpersonal relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. This need is also closely related to the sense of community and how well students engage with campus life. Social integration is measured by the frequency of positive interactions with peers and faculty and involvement in the extracurricular activity. Self-directed learning is often described as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 10). In this study, self-directed learning is measured by a 24-items instrument adapted from studies by Pfordresher (2016) and Stockdale (2003).

## **PROJECT PURPOSE**

Persistence is an important measure of effectiveness for institutions of higher education. The project aims to address the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD)'s concerns about nontraditional graduate students course completion and persistence in the programs. Particularly, this project intends to examine to what extent some internal factors affect nontraditional graduate students academic persistence. The findings will provide the college administrators' knowledge and understanding of factors contributing to nontraditional graduate students persistence so that some mechanisms will put in place within the programs to increase graduate students persistence and therefore degree completion rate. Eight research questions are formulated to guide this study:

1. To what extent does academic integration influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?
2. To what extent does social integration influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?
3. To what extent does self-directed learning influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?
4. To what extent does satisfaction to program services influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?
5. How does academic integration influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?
6. How does social integration influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?
7. How does self-directed learning influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?
8. How does satisfaction to program services influence nontraditional graduate student decision to persist in their studies?

## **METHOD**

The study will employ a mixed-methods sequential explanatory study to identify factors contributing to nontraditional students' persistence in the postsecondary programs by obtaining quantitative results from a survey of about 100 current graduate students and then following up with twelve purposefully selected individuals to explore those results in more depth through a qualitative case study analysis. In the first phase of the study, the research questions (RQ1-4) will focus on how selected internal factors served as predictors of students' persistence in the program. In the second phase, twelve case studies from distinct participant groups will be explored in-depth the results from the statistical tests. In this phase, the research questions (RQ5-8) will address five internal factors that may be found to have different effects on academic persistence.

### **Participants**

Nontraditional students enrolled in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) will be invited to participate in this study. In this study, nontraditional graduate students are students with one or more of this characteristics: above 24 years for undergraduate, being married, having one or more dependents, being a veteran or service member, delaying postsecondary enrollment, being employed full-time enrolled and being in the program on a part-time basis. The recruitment procedure will be started in April after we obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The participants will be recruited through a thorough consent seeking procedure. The recruitment process will begin by sending out invitation emails to all students in CEHD in the first phase of the study. In the second phase, twelve case studies from distinct participant groups will be selected through purposive sampling procedures. The selection criteria include: (1) At least three years in the graduate program, (2) Enrolled in both Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, (3) GPA above 3.0. These criteria are set based on the assumptions that a graduate student typically has to complete all the required courses within four years in the program with minimum GPA 3.0. If the participants were enrolled in Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, it shows that they are active in the graduate program. These participants' characteristics will assist in probing the influence of internal factors and academic persistence.

## **Measures**

The data will be collected through a self-reported questionnaire. The survey items are adapted from studies by Pfordresher (2016) and Stockdale (2003). The adapted survey will be administered in the Spring and Summer I 2017 semester and will be offered in an electronic format that is available online. The questionnaire will approximately 30 minutes to complete and participant data will be submitted anonymously. To assess the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study will be conducted. The internal factors include academic integration, social integration, quality of programs, current GPA (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and self-directed learning (Corno & Kanfer, 1993). The online survey has 19 questions and the interview protocol consists of four parts. Part I: Areas related to academic integration. Part II: Factors related to social integration and Part III: Factors related to self-directed learning readiness and Part IV: Satisfaction to Programs Service and Quality.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

After receiving permission to proceed with the study from the Institutional Review Board, contact information of eligible nontraditional graduate students will be obtained from the Office of Institutional Research. From the sampling frame, the researchers will send an invitation letter via electronic mail to the samples requesting their participation. If the sample agreed to participate, the link to the online questionnaire will be sent to them. In the second phase, about twelve participants will be selected through purposive sampling. Additional selection criteria include: above 24 years for undergraduate, being married, having one or more dependents, delaying postsecondary enrollment, being employed full-time and not enrolled in Spring 2017. They will be contacted through emails and semi-structured interviews will be conducted in a conference room.

## **Data Analysis**

In the first phase, quantitative data will be reduced and organized by conducting a principal components exploratory factor analysis to reveal the relevant factors for analysis. The principal components exploratory factor analysis will be followed by reliability analysis to assess the Cronbach's alpha for each factor. The data will then analyze using a two-way univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). In the second phase, Bodgan and Biklen (1998) approach will be used for transcribing and analyzing the interview data for emerging themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the interview data, theoretical memos will be used throughout the data analysis process. Theoretical memos will show ideas about the coding categories, relationships between categories, and directions for further analysis. The memos will be sorted in order to present the emerging themes that link the categories.

## **TIMELINE OF THE PROJECT**

### **Spring 2017 (February-April)**

- Review related literature
- Prepare research proposal
- Prepare data collection instruments
- Submit IRB protocol and obtain IRB approval
- \*Obtain sampling frame from Registrar Office/CEHD Student Database

### **Summer I 2017 (May-June)**

- Review related literature
- Recruit sample and conduct online survey
- Analyze quantitative data from online survey
- Conduct descriptive analysis and inferential statistical analysis

### **Summer II 2017 (July-August)**

- Write the quantitative result

- Prepare research report draft

#### **Fall 2017 (September-December)**

- Review related literature
- Conduct semi-structured face-to-face or phone interviews with selected participants
- Transcribe interview data
- Coding and analyze interview transcription
- Prepare final research report
- Prepare and submit conference proposal for presentation (s)
- Prepare and submit manuscript (s)

### **BUDGET AND JUSTIFICATION**

(Redacted)

### **ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES**

The results of this study are expected to have practical implications for higher education institutions' administrators and educators to gain an in-depth understanding the phenomenon of academic persistence among non-traditional graduate students. Factors that will enhance persistence or create barriers to completion of a program need to be understood in order to improve planning of evidence-based interventions. Early identification of the students who may not succeed in a course or a program can allow application of interventions by the educators to strengthen nontraditional student persistence. Particularly, if the results indicate that internal factors influence graduate students academic persistence or success, efforts can be channeled to enhance nontraditional graduate students internal factors such as academic integration, social integration, and self-directed learning.

### **PLAN FOR CONTINUING RESEARCH**

A presentation proposal will be submitted to the Annual Conference of American Evaluation Association (AEA) and is planned to present the results in November 2017. A manuscript will be developed and submitted for publication to the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice* or *The International Journal of Self-directed Learning*. This study will be continued and expanded. First, replicate the study with the larger population by including traditional students in the same college. Second, replicate the study in colleges that are having low completion rates in the university. Third, replicate the study by investigating external factors that may influence academic persistence such as finances, hours of employment, family responsibilities, outside encouragement, opportunity to transfer, and life crises. Fourth, employ a longitudinal method with this cohort of students, they will be followed for the duration of a program of study. The longitudinal data set will be more comprehensive to understand student's academic persistence phenomenon. WMU's internal funding such as Faculty Research and Creative Activities Award (FRACAA) and external funding will be sought in January 2018 to support future research.

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