
At Issue

Lack of Persistence in College and the High-Achieving, Low-Income Student: A Review of the Literature

Sherell D. Wilson

Dr. Wilson is a District-Based Administrator in the Hillsborough County, Florida, school district.

College retention rates are of increasing concern for higher education researchers, administrators, and policymakers alike, and even more so at the community college level. In both human and economic terms, the issue staggers the imagination. As we agonize over the issue, we seem to be neglecting a crucial group of students at the heart of our failure to retain and successfully graduate students. We are failing an exceptional group of young adults who are high-achieving students from lower-income families. Although the extent of this research review is not exhaustive, it is representative of the current research into the issue of college persistence with an emphasis on high-achieving, low-income students. The purpose of this literature review is to present factors of influence identified in the research and to organize those influences into clarifying categories for future inquiry.

High-Achieving, Low-Income (HALI) Students

Who are these high-achieving, low-income students? Caroline M. Hoxby of Stanford University and Christopher Avery of Harvard University conducted a study entitled *The Missing One-Offs: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students*

in which they garnered data on every student who took the SAT during the prior year (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). They write that this population group of high-achieving, low-income (HALI) scholars can be in the top 4% of their class and score in the top 10% on the SAT or ACT. Nonetheless, only a third attend one of the top 200 highly selective colleges while three-quarters of the high achievers from higher-income households do. The researchers relate that the bulk of HALI students attend community colleges or four-year institutions close to home. Unfortunately, large portions fail to graduate.

For this article, the HALI population group is defined in terms of the Kent Cooke Foundation report, *Achievement Trap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Lower Income Families* (Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007). The report identifies high-achieving, lower-income students as those scoring “in the top 25 percent on nationally normed standardized tests and whose family incomes (adjusted for family size) are below the national median” (p. 4). In the study, Wyner et al. (2007) estimate the group membership at 3.4 million students. The study characterizes the group in the following ways: consisting of students in poverty and those from working-class families; cutting across gender and race lines; having no regional or urban/rural distinctions. The authors explain, “They are found all across the country, within every race, among both gender groups, and in every sort of geographic area” (p. 10).

HALI Students and the College Persistence Problem

To put this unique group within the context of the college persistence problem, consider the research findings. “While more than nine out of ten high-achieving high school students in both income halves attend college, high-achieving, lower-income students are less likely to graduate from college than their higher-income peers” (Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007, p. 5). The shortfall in student retention rates among high-achieving, low-income students has been well documented (Deil-Amen, 2011; Feldman & Zimble, 2011); however, this particular shortfall is even more profound at community colleges (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Wyner et al., 2007). The purpose of this literature review is to facilitate the pursuit of inquiry into this timely and crucial issue.

Literature Review Methodology

An overview of the procedure followed in gathering this sample literature review is presented here to orient the reader to the methods used to gather the research summarized in this article. Search descriptors used, in addition to high-achieving and low-income, include college choice, first year of college, community college, college student needs, student persistence, student retention, and degree completion. The five procedures undertaken to obtain relevant literature for this literature review included: (1) a computer search of relevant databases (e.g., EBSCOhost, Education Full Text, Academic Search Premier, ProQuest, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses) for articles, books, dissertations, and theses; (2) a hand search of relevant journals (e.g., *Education Week*, *ERIC*, *ASHE Higher Education Report Series*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Retention*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Review of Educational Research*, *Community College Review*); (3) a search of relevant websites (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, Florida Department of Education, Take Stock in Children, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation); (4) a search of references in relevant articles, chapters, and books for relevant citations; and (5) contacting experts in the topic area for suggestions about additional references.

Literature Review

The brief review of the literature presented here is representative of the research into college student retention and HALI student persistence in college. The first year of college and the transition from the first year of college to the next can be especially difficult for high-achieving, low-income students (Deil-Amen, 2011; Feldman & Zimbler, 2011; Hossler, Kuh, & Olsen, 2001; McLoughlin, 2011; Schmertz, 2010). Researchers assert that addressing the retention rate problem requires additional knowledge about this group of students (Deil-Amen, 2011; Feldman & Zimbler, 2011; Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007). Wyner et al. (2007) state, “College and university presidents, administrators, and faculty need to learn more about why high-achieving, lower-income students drop out of college, and to emulate practices proven to increase graduation rates” (p. 33).

The research conducted by Bergerson (2007) and Chhen Stewart (2012) helps to diminish the notion that financial aspects are a major impediment to the continued enrollment of HALI students. These students often acquire adequate financial aid packages. However, academic and social integration is a prevailing factor that influences students’ decisions about their continued enrollment (Bergerson, 2007; Chhen Stewart,

2012). The findings help to accomplish a broader discussion about how such factors translate to students' needs and the effects of those needs on their decisions about continuing their enrollment in higher education. Still, there is uncertainty about whether the findings could be generalized to student populations other than those attending four-year universities.

Closer examination of the literature reveals that the first year of college is a tipping point. Hossler, Kuh, and Olsen (2001) highlight that the largest fraction of students leave during the first year of college. The numbers are striking. Feldman and Zimbler (2011) report, "Twenty-eight percent of first-year students in four-year colleges do not return for their sophomore year. An alarming forty-four percent among students enrolled in community colleges do not return for their sophomore year" (p. 1). The extent to which students drop out in the first year, especially at community colleges, is significant.

An extensive body of literature (Deil-Amen, 2011; Flowers, 2006; Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Schmertz, 2010) focused on the factors that influence students' continuous enrollment decisions. Napoli and Wortman (1998) indicate, "It is likely that the greater departure rates among community college students are related to problems associated with meeting demands from multiple communities" (p. 449). Multiple communities may include such smaller community units as family, friends, and work. Napoli and Wortman's (1998) study contributes in the identification of factors that influence student retention. The authors add that an imbalance of psychosocial factors is a major source of community college student departure. They list conscientiousness, self-esteem, social support, and life events as the psychosocial factors they have identified.

Deil-Amen (2011) acknowledges that two-year community college students "are among the most marginalized in higher education" (p. 59). The author relates that on-campus supports assisting students with their sense of adjustment, comfort, belonging, and competence influenced students' decisions significantly about continuing their enrollment.

17 Factors. Based on my review of the literature, I have identified a list of 17 factors from the research that tend to influence students' decisions about continued enrollment. These may serve as a foundation for further inquiry into the complex dynamic of college persistence. The factors are presented with references below:

1. Precollege experiences (Schmertz, 2010)
2. Early encouragement of degree aspirations (Deafenbaugh, 2007)

-
3. Psychosocial factors, such as conscientiousness, self-esteem, social support, and life experiences (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Schmertz, 2010)
 4. Budgeting and/or employment (Deafenbaugh, 2007; McLoughlin, 2011)
 5. Social and emotional support from parents/family (Deafenbaugh, 2007)
 6. Social engagement with instructors and peers on campus (Feldman & Zimbler, 2011; Wirt, 2010)
 7. On-campus supports to match the social and emotional support of family and precollege friends (Bergerson, 2007; Chhen Stewart, 2012; Deafenbaugh, 2007)
 8. Sense of adjustment, comfort, belonging, and competence (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Deil-Amen, 2011)
 9. Sense of self-efficacy (Flowers, 2006; McLoughlin, 2011; Schmertz, 2010)
 10. Success strategies: time management, goal focus, writing abilities, test taking, and self-advocacy (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Feldman & Zimbler, 2011)
 11. Social and cultural capital (McLoughlin, 2011)
 12. Match between the academic expectations and rigor during high school experiences and college (Chhen Stewart, 2012)
 13. Isolation from day-to-day demands of family, friends, and work (Napoli & Wortman, 1998)
 14. Academic and social integration experiences on campus (Flowers, 2006)
 15. Background factors and life experiences—parental and family responsibilities as well as work and career experiences (Flowers, 2006)
 16. Self-regulated learning (Black, 2008)
 17. Student’s educational expectancies (Diemer & Li, 2012)

Factor Categories: Individual/Internal Influences and External Influences. To approach these factors as subgroupings, I suggest that they may be further organized into two broad categories: individual/internal influences and external influences. The individual/internal influences category includes:

-
- (a) Budgeting and/or employment (Deafenbaugh, 2007; McLoughlin, 2011)
 - (b) Psychosocial factors, such as conscientiousness, self-esteem, social support, and life experiences (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Schmertz, 2010)
 - (c) Sense of adjustment, comfort, belonging, and competence (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Deil-Amen, 2011)
 - (d) Sense of self-efficacy (Flowers, 2006; McLoughlin, 2011; Schmertz, 2010)
 - (e) Success strategies: time management, goal focus, writing abilities, test taking, and self-advocacy (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Feldman & Zimbler, 2011)
 - (f) Social and cultural capital (McLoughlin, 2011)
 - (g) Background factors and life experiences—parental and family responsibilities as well as work and career experiences (Flowers, 2006)
 - (h) Self-regulated learning (Black, 2008)
 - (i) Student's educational expectancies (Diemer & Li, 2012)

The external influences category includes:

- (a) Precollege experiences (Schmertz, 2010)
- (b) Early encouragement of degree aspirations (Deafenbaugh, 2007)
- (c) Match between the academic expectations and rigor during high school experiences and college (Chhen Stewart, 2012)
- (d) Social and emotional support from parents/family (Deafenbaugh, 2007)
- (e) Social engagement with instructors and peers on campus (Feldman & Zimbler, 2011; Wirt, 2010)
- (f) On-campus supports to match the social and emotional support of family and precollege friends (Bergerson, 2007; Chhen Stewart, 2012; Deafenbaugh, 2007)
- (g) Isolation from day-to-day demands of family, friends, and work (Napoli & Wortman, 1998)

(h) Academic and social integration experiences on campus
(Flowers, 2006)

The categories of individual/internal influences and external influences provide us with a conceptualization from which to examine those factors which may work in concert with one another from the perspective of the individual and from that of the student's greater experiential context.

Six Component Factor Groups. I further suggest that the multiple factors may be serviceably organized into six component groups of practices and influences as a method for shaping possible research approaches and inquiry. Four of the six suggested component groups are composed of the factors from the external influences category.

1. Complementary School to College Curriculum: associated factors of the match between the academic expectations and rigor during high school experiences and college (Chhen Stewart, 2012) Precollege and Bridge Programs: associated factor of precollege experiences (Schmertz, 2010)
2. Academic Advisement and Support: associated factor of early encouragement of degree aspirations (Deafenbaugh, 2007)
3. Sense of Community: associated factors of social engagement with instructors and peers on campus (Feldman & Zimblar, 2011; Wirt, 2010), as well as academic and social integration experiences on campus (Flowers, 2006).

Identification of the remaining two component groups may be comprised of the factors of the individual/internal influences category. The sixth of these components has become, in my mind, one of the most important of them all in that the associated factors attributable to it are so extensive. This sixth category is Psychosocial Development with associated factors that include an extensive list of psychosocial factors identified by the research.

4. Adequate Financial Resources: associated factors of budgeting and/or employment (Deafenbaugh, 2007; McLoughlin, 2011).
5. Psychosocial Development:
 - (a) Conscientiousness, self-esteem, social support, and life experiences (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Schmertz, 2010)
 - (b) Social and emotional support from parents/family (Deafenbaugh, 2007)

-
- (c) On-campus supports to match the social and emotional support of family and precollege friends (Bergerson, 2007; Chhen Stewart, 2012; Deafenbaugh, 2007)
 - (d) Sense of adjustment, comfort, belonging, and competence (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Deil-Amen, 2011)
 - (e) Sense of self-efficacy (Flowers, 2006; McLoughlin, 2011; Schmertz, 2010)
 - (f) Success strategies—time management, goal focus, writing abilities, test taking, and self-advocacy (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Feldman & Zimble, 2011)
 - (g) Isolation from day-to-day demands of family, friends, and work (Napoli & Wortman, 1998)
 - (h) Background factors and life experiences—parental and family responsibilities as well as work and career experiences (Flowers, 2006)
 - (i) Self-regulated learning (Black, 2008)
 - (j) Student’s educational expectancies (Diemer & Li, 2012)
 - (k) Social and cultural capital (McLoughlin, 2011)

The extensive nature of the psychosocial development factors identified by research contribute to my tentative theory of the phenomenon of nonpersistent college students—high-achieving, low-income students in community colleges may require psychosocial development in order to persist in college.

Summary and Implications for Further Study

The literature review demonstrates the need for further research specific to identifying and to remedying the causes of the deficits in second-year enrollments of high-achieving, low-income students. The research suggests the promise of exploring multiple factors among a specific population. The list of factors identified from the research literature and my suggested categorizations and component groupings may serve to further the research by providing inroads for shaping future research inquiry.

The review of the literature reveals key findings such as those by Bergerson (2007) and Chhen Stewart (2012) indicating that finances may not serve as a major impediment, but that academic and social integration is a prevailing factor. The overwhelming instance of psychosocial develop-

ment indicators identified in the research has caused me to speculate that there may be strong evidence that HALI students may not continue their enrollment in higher education because of, in large part, their underlying need for psychosocial development. My recommendation is that future studies inquire into the relationship between HALI student needs and the decisions HALI students are making about their enrollment status, especially at community colleges.

References

- Bergerson, A. (2007). Exploring the impact of social class on adjustment to college: Anna's story. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)*, 20(1), 99–119. doi:10.1080/09518390600923610
- Black, K. R. (2008). *Self-regulated learning as a predictor of persistence among first year students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Northern Colorado). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (UMI No. 3348781)
- Byrd, K. L., & MacDonald, G. (2005). Defining college readiness from the inside out: First generation college student perspectives. *Community College Review*, 33(1), 22–37.
- Chhen Stewart, L. M. (2012). *First-generation, low-income college students during the first semester in higher education: Challenges and successes* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nevada, Reno). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (UMI No. 3511774)
- Deafenbaugh, J. (2007). *Low-income, high ability scholars: an in-depth examination of their college transition and persistence experiences*. (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University). Retrieved from <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>
- Deil-Amen, R. (2011). Socio-academic integrative moments: Rethinking academic and social integration among two-year college students in career-related programs. *Journal of Higher Education*, 82(1), 54–91.
- Diemer, M. A., & Li, C. (2012). Longitudinal roles of precollege contexts in low-income youths' postsecondary persistence. *Developmental Psychology*, 48(6), 1686–1693. doi:10.1037/a0025347
- Feldman, R., & Zimbler, M. (2011). *Engendering college student success: Improving the first year and beyond*. Retrieved from the McGraw-Hill Research Foundation: <http://mcgraw-hillresearchfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/white-paper-engendering-college-first-year-experience-by-bob-feldman.pdf>
- Flowers, L. A. (2006, February). Effects of attending a two-year institution on African American males' academic and social integration in the first year. *Teachers College Record*, 108, 2, 267–286. Retrieved from Education Full Text (Wilson) database.

-
- Hossler, D., Kuh, G., & Olsen, D. (2001). Finding (more) fruit on the vines: Using higher education research and institutional research to guide institutional policies and strategies (Part II). *Research in Higher Education*, 42, 223–235. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Hoxby, C. M., & Avery, C. (2012). *The missing “One-Offs”: The hidden supply of high-achieving, low income students* (No. w18586). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- McLoughlin, Paul J., II. (2011). *Full financial aid in the ivy league: How high-achieving, low-income undergraduates negotiate the elite college environment* (Doctoral dissertation, Boston College). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (UMI No. 3449271)
- Napoli, A. R., & Wortman, P. M. (1998). Psychosocial factors related to retention and early departure of two-year community college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 39(4), 419–455.
- Schmertz, B. A. (2010). *Bridging the class divide: The qualitative evaluation of a summer bridge program for low-income students at an elite university* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (UMI No. 3451471)
- Wirt, L. G. (2010). *Exploring predictors of faculty-student interaction for community college students* (Doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (UMI No. 3425935)
- Wyner, J. S., Bridgeland, J. M., & Dilulio, J. J. (2007). *Achievement trap: How America is failing millions of high-achieving students from lower income families*. Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

Copyright of *The Community College Enterprise* is the property of Schoolcraft College, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted on a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.