

Chapter 66

The Predictive Role of Gender and Race on Student Retention

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ABSTRACT

Student retention is an important issue in American higher education, and has major impacts on students' access to employment and earning potential. Furthermore, it significantly influences the finances of colleges and universities. This chapter looks at the predictive role of gender and race on students' college retention, and analyzes the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS, 2002) that follows a nationally representative cohort of students from 2002, when they were high school sophomores, through their postsecondary education. The analytic sample of this research includes high school graduates who remained in the study from 2002-2012, and reported "any known degree attained as of June 2013." Findings indicate that male students are more likely to drop out of college compared to female students, and this gender effect does not change even after controlling for several other variables. Similar to gender, race is also found to be a significant predictor of student retention.

INTRODUCTION

Over a third of America's college students and over half of our minority students don't earn a degree, even after six years. So, we don't just need to open the doors of college to more Americans; we need to make sure they stick with it through graduation. That is critical. (Obama, 2010)

Given the role of educational credentials in American society in which over half of all workers currently have at least bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015a), higher education attainment is the admission ticket to most professional occupations. Higher education is highly valued by American society and most people seek higher education to improve their job prospects and social status. Those with a bachelor's degree are more likely to find lucrative professional jobs compared to those with a high school diploma (Baum et al., 2010). The earning power of workers with a bachelor's degree is 1.7 times higher than the average earning by those with only a high school diploma, and 2.3 times higher than the earnings of high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015b).

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Today the transition from high school to college is an important milestone for American youth in the pathway to adulthood. The transition to adulthood in the United States has changed in recent decades and no longer depends on the traditional milestones that mark adulthood, such as leaving home, securing full time employment, establishing a home and forming a family (Berlin et al., 2010; McLanahan et al., 2010; Arnett, 2000). In the contemporary United States, “young adults take far longer to reach economic and social maturity than their contemporaries did five or six decades ago. In large part, this shift is attributable to the expansion of higher education beginning in the late 1960s” (Berlin et al., 2010, p. 3). In other words, more and more young adults are choosing to go to college.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Compared to the past, current research observes that young adults are marrying at a later age and that they also stay in school for longer periods of time (Settersten & Ray, 2010). This is more salient for women because the median age of marriage and childbearing for women has dramatically increased, which parallels the increasing rate of college attendance among women. In other words, the priorities of women in society have changed over time; and, they are now delaying marriage and childbearing in favor of attending college. In 1960, the median age for a first marriage for a woman was 20 years old. Today the median age for a woman’s first marriage is 26 years old (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). A college degree for women is recognized as a form of insurance against poverty and income deprivation (Buchman & DiPirete, 2006). Buchmann (2006) explains this situation as follows:

In the 1960s and 70s, girls were getting better grades, but many young women were not going to college, or they were dropping out of college to get married. Now the benefits of a college education are growing faster for women than for men, and women are taking advantage... The generation of women who were born in the 1960s were the first to see their mothers getting divorced and having few options in the labor market. Many of these women were likely thinking, they wanted to avoid that situation by getting a college degree. (as cited in Grabmeier, 2006)

In relation to the new transition to adulthood, it is important to understand what is going on with young people after they graduate from high school. Graduating from high school is traditionally seen as a first step into adulthood. Historically, immediately after high school graduation, young adults left home, and began to look for full-time work. However, today graduating from high school is no longer considered to be an important enough achievement to ensure reasonable job and career prospects or opportunities. Therefore, many young adults seek to obtain at least some postsecondary education after graduating from high school (Berlin et al. 2010). This new longer transition to adulthood is also supported through family perception that early transition to work and marriage is no longer optimal (Berlin et al. 2010). The majority of parents expect their children to graduate from high school and complete at least some postsecondary education. In 2012, about 65% of parents with students in grades six through 12 expected that their child would attain a bachelor’s degree or higher (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015).

The data illustrates that enrollment of underrepresented students has steadily increased over time. Specifically, women have outnumbered men on college campuses since the late 1980s (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). However, the proportion of both men and women enrolling in college has increased over the years, with the increase in the number of female students being more substantial. The college enrollment rate

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