HITTING THE BOOKS AGAIN: FACTORS INFLUENCING THE INTENTIONS OF YOUNG ADULTS TO REENROLL IN COLLEGE

KIM SCHATZEL, PH.D.
THOMAS CALLAHAN, PH.D.
TIMOTHY DAVIS, MBA, MUP, MSF
The University of Michigan–Dearborn

ABSTRACT
Results from the analyses of data from 463 former college students between the ages of 25 and 34 years old identify those most likely to reenroll in higher education in the near future. Those who intend to reenroll are more likely to be members of minority groups, younger, single, and recently laid-off, have earned more credits, and hold strong beliefs about the value of education. Specific recommendations for strategies and policies through which colleges could motivate former students to reenroll and facilitate their transitions back into the educational system are offered. Among these, programs that include techniques for updating technology skills, improving time management and goal setting practices, and reinforcing study habits appear to be particularly appropriate to the needs of this subpopulation. Suggestions for future research on stopouts, as well as stayouts, conclude the study.

INTRODUCTION
In addition to facing harsh economic times, institutions of higher learning are also facing a shrinking pool of traditional students. The projected number of high-school graduates is not expected to equal its 2008 peak until after 2018
(National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). However, about eight million adults, an estimated 21% of 25 to 34 year olds in the United States, have attended college and withdrawn without completing a degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Some of these individuals do not intend to return to college at any time in the future, whereas others intend to reenroll. Those who choose to reenroll after an absence of one or more semesters are referred to as stopouts (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973). This group of nontraditional former college students represents a large and unique pool of potential students for colleges and universities.

To our knowledge, no previous research has specifically examined the demographic, psychographic, and situational factors that affect nontraditional students’ intentions to reenroll. For that reason, the purpose of this study is to specifically identify the demographic and psychographic factors that influence the intention to reenroll among young adult stopouts.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Because stopout behaviors encompass many factors associated with the attraction to and withdrawal from higher education, hypotheses for this study have been developed relying on multiple streams of research, including those associated with the initial entry, retention, withdrawal, and reenrollment of adult learners.

The existing literature on stopout and stayout behaviors has relied on theoretical models of college retention and withdrawal behaviors. Models that have guided significant research in the study of stopouts are Tinto’s (1975, 1993) explanations of student retention. In these models, students enter higher education with specific family backgrounds and individual characteristics. They begin with a commitment to the concept of higher education, and later develop a commitment to a specific institution. These commitments influence their academic performance and intellectual development, leading to academic integration into the system. Social systems also affect their commitments to an institution and, more generally, higher education. The quality of interactions with faculty and fellow students leads to corresponding levels of social integration. Levels of academic and social integration define the fit between students and academic institutions, which in turn determine the choice to stay or leave.

Influenced by the employee turnover models developed in the organizational sciences, Bean (1990) proposed a model of student attrition that emphasized attitudes and intentions, and most importantly, the intentions to stay or withdraw. Bean and Eaton (2000) later proposed that behaviors, cognitions, and attitudes determine levels of both academic and social integration. Psychological concepts such as self-efficacy, approach-avoidance, and locus of control help explain withdrawal behaviors in this extension of models of attraction and retention. Expanding research to include nontraditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) emphasized factors external to the institutional environment, including
employment opportunities, family responsibilities, financial resources, and opportunities to transfer to another institution.

Student withdrawal and retention behaviors also have been studied from the economic perspective associated with human factors theory (Becker, 1964). In this instance, St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (2000) have developed the college choice nexus model to include the influences of economic and financial variables in student choice. In this three-step model, socioeconomic factors and academic abilities lead potential students to form dispositions toward an educational institution. Next, students perform cost-benefit analyses associated with the decision to choose a particular academic institution. After enrollment, students assess the congruence of their previous expectations with actual experiences. In this third stage, factors such as low grades or negative social interactions create conflicts with earlier predictions. The college choice nexus model represents a rational process relying on self-assessed probabilities of success and failure for the student at an institution. According to Cabrera et al. (2000), the overall process explains decisions to remain enrolled in or withdraw from an institution. Relying on guidance from the above perspectives, together with previous research on stopouts and stayouts, our overall research goal is to identify predictors of reenrollment intentions for young adults with previous college experiences.

**DEPENDENT VARIABLE**

Intentions are important variables in the student retention literature. Bean (1990) and Bean and Eaton (2000) have identified intentions to stay as the strongest predictors of student retention. Regardless, intentions represent cognitive variables, rather than behavioral variables. Although intentions have been shown to predict behaviors in the retention literature, one might question the role of intentions as a surrogate for reenrollment among stopouts. Combining elements from the Tinto (1993) and Bean (1990) models, Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1993) have shown that intentions directly affect retention behaviors.

Empirical evidence for the relationship between intentions and reenrollment has been provided by Stokes and Zusman (1992) and Woosley (2004). At the university Woosley (2004) studied, 54% of stopouts stated intentions to reenroll. Of those, 34% actually reenrolled in that university within 1 year. Arguably, this relationship is higher than her results indicate. Her data do not include reenrollment at any other institution and tracked students for only a period of 1 year following their withdrawals.

The funding agency for this research required the examination of a specific group of former college students: those 25-34 years old, with previous college experiences, but no degree. For the purposes of the hypotheses, we refer to this group as YAPEENDs, young adults, with previous educational experiences, but no degrees.
MINORITY STATUS

Tinto (1993) posits that minorities may face additional social and academic integration difficulties when pursuing higher education. Astone, Shoehn, Ensminger, and Rothert (2000) describe costs of enrollment, utility of education for the individual, and likelihood of success as factors affecting African Americans’ decisions to reenroll. Among studies assessing the effects of minority status on stopouts, Pascarella, Duby, Miller, and Rasher (1981), DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2006), and Johnson (2006) have found that African Americans are more likely to stopout of college than are majority group members, although DesJardins et al. (2006) demonstrate that these effects disappear when factors such as income and age are controlled. Moreover, Johnson (2006) has reported that minority students are less likely to reenroll in college than are Caucasians. In empirical research that has included both intentions and behaviors, Woosley et al. (2005) have shown that minority groups are less likely to state the intention to reenroll in college, but do not differ in their actual reenrollment.

Minority students at racially diverse institutions are more likely to stopout (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Interestingly, Bynum and Thompson (1983) present evidence that minority status itself explains withdrawal behaviors. In their study of four universities, minority students are more likely to stopout or stayout, even in the instances in which Caucasians represented the minority group. The research in this area is mixed, but in light of the research showing minorities are more likely to stop out, we predict that minorities will be less likely to state the intention to return.

**Hypothesis 1:** Majority group members will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will minority group members.

GENDER

In most cases, previous research has shown that women express more motivation to enroll and do participate in higher education in greater percentages than do men (Diprete & Buchmann, 2006; Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002).

Johnson (2006) demonstrates that female students are less likely to reenroll than are male students. Woosley et al. (2005) have shown that males are more likely to state the intention to reenroll, but are not more likely to reenroll than are females. Stratton et al. (2008) report that women’s withdrawal behavior is often related to their decisions to temporarily stop out of education, whereas men are more likely to stayout. Stimpson and Janosik (2008) report that after disciplinary suspensions, men are three times more likely to reenroll than are women. Because the Stratton et al. (2008) study represents a large sample, multi-institution sample, we predict that young adult women will be more likely to express an intention to reenroll.
Hypothesis II: YAPEEND women will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEEND men.

AGE

The influence of age on adult learners’ intentions to pursue higher education has been researched extensively. For example, Thomas (2001) summarizes the literature that describes barriers faced by older students (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Benshoff, 1991; Klein, 1990; Richter-Anton, 1986; Spanard, 1990). Barriers preventing older individuals from socially integrating back into college are related to limited social support systems, a lack of peers, and the presence of the financial, family, and work obligations (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Related to withdrawal behaviors, Hoyt and Winn (2004), DesJardins et al. (2006), and Grossett (1993) indicate that stopouts are more likely to be older than continuing students. Horn (1998), Burley, Butner, and Cejda (2001), and Berkovitz and O’Quin (2007) present evidence that older students are more likely to be stayouts than stopouts after withdrawal. A summary of this research indicates that the majority of studies indicate that age has a negative relationship with the intention to pursue higher education.

Hypothesis III: Younger YAPEENDs will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be older YAPEENDs.

FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Woosley (2004) and Gentemann, Ahson, and Phelps (1998) have shown that those students who did not reenroll reported greater conflicts between work and school before their withdrawals. The conclusions from these studies highlight the significant difficulties students face when attempting to maintain employment and reenroll in education.

Hypothesis IV: Unemployed or part-time YAPEEND workers will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEEND full-time workers.

DISPLACED WORKER STATUS

Specifically describing stopouts, Light (1995) has established that high local unemployment rates significantly predict students’ intentions to reenroll. Women who have more concerns about the stability of their jobs are more likely to state the intention to reenroll in college (Smart & Pascarella, 1987). Regardless of the extent to which education leads to a comparably salaried job, most evidence indicates that many displaced workers choose education following lay-offs (Ghilani, 2008; Knapp & Harms, 2002).
Hypothesis V: YAPEEND displaced workers will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEEND workers who have not been displaced.

INCOME

DesJardins et al. (2006) estimate that about three-quarters of high income students attend college continuously until graduation, whereas about three-quarters of both middle and low incomes students stopout at some point. Furthermore, Johnson (2006) has shown that first generation college students, often from lower socioeconomic strata, are less likely to reenroll after a stopout incidence. From an economic perspective, education is often not a realistic choice for those in lower economic strata. According to the human capital (Becker, 1964) and choice nexus models (St. John et al., 2000), for poor individuals the costs of education often outweigh perceived benefits. The above review indicates that low incomes are often associated with fewer or truncated educational experiences.

Hypothesis VI: YAPEENDs with greater incomes will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEENDs with lesser incomes.

FINANCES

St. John et al. (2000) have emphasized the importance of costs as determinants of the decision to withdraw from and reenroll in college. They report that the costs of college have a substantial negative influence on college persistence behaviors. Hoyt and Wynn (2004) report stopouts are more concerned about financial problems than are those who stay out. Horn (1998) and Tumen and Shulruf (2008) hypothesize that reenrollment may represent a means of delaying repayment of student loans. Regardless, all forms of financial aid increase the probability of remaining in college (DesJardins et al. 2006). Support from loans increases the likelihood of withdrawal (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002). Previous research leaves little doubt that the costs associated with higher education act as barriers to adults’ interests in and plans to attend higher education.

Hypothesis VII: YAPEENDs who state fewer concerns about costs will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEENDs who state more concerns about costs.

TIME

Silva, Cahalan, Lacierno-Paquet, and Stowe (1998) believe that time creates the strongest barrier of all for adult learners. From an economic perspective,
Stratton et al. (2007) point out that time spent in education after reenrollment itself represents an opportunity cost. Time for education must be weighed against other uses of time, such as opportunities for leisure activities or additional immediate earnings.

*Hypothesis VIII:* YAPEENDs who state fewer concerns about time conflicts will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll than will be YAPEENDs who state more concerns about time conflicts.

**FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES**

Students who have young children are more likely to stay out than stop out of college when compared to students who do not have young children (Gentemann et al., 1998; Horn, 1998; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Stratton et al., 2008). Pompper (2006) reports that stopouts who later reenrolled identified child care and family responsibilities as significant reasons for their previous withdrawals. From an economic perspective, marriage increases an individual’s household responsibilities and increases the likelihood of stopping out (Stratton et al., 2008). Women with children under the age of 6 also are more likely to stop out (Stratton et al., 2008). Based on this evidence, family responsibilities do appear to create barriers for adult learners to reenroll in college.

*Hypothesis IXa:* YAPEENDs who are single will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEENDs who are married or partnered.

*Hypothesis IXb:* YAPEENDs with fewer children will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll than will be YAPEENDs who have more children.

**IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION**

From a theoretical perspective, Tinto (1993) emphasizes the importance of educational goals and a commitment to education in students’ intentions to remain in or withdraw from college. For stopouts specifically, Woosley et al. (2005) have indicated that commitment to education is a strong predictor of the intention to reenroll.

*Hypothesis X:* YAPEENDs who agree that a college education is important will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEENDs who do not perceive education as being important.
PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Tinto (1993) posits that students begin higher education with skills and abilities that influence their decisions and behaviors throughout their college experiences. Among the most important of these are cognitive skills, abilities, and strategies for success. In support of the importance of these variables among stopouts, studies by Johnson (2006), Berkovitz and O’Quin (2006), and DesJardins et al. (2006) have established that academic performance does affect adults’ probabilities of reenrolling in college. Johnson (2006) and Wilson (2007) describe GPA as the most significant explanation for a broad category of student persistence behaviors, including reenrollment. Emphasizing the importance of previous preparation and success, Daubman et al. (1985) have established that among students who reenroll the semester after withdrawal on academic probation, only 9% successfully complete the next semester. Burley et al. (2001) report that over three-quarters of students who stop out from community college after only one semester had started with identifiable learning deficiencies. Similarly, Woosley (2004), Johnson (2006), and DesJardins et al. (2006) maintain that SAT/ACT scores differentiate those who reenroll from those who do not. Previous academic success and satisfaction with academic achievement were strong predictors of actual reenrollment in the Woosley et al. (2005) study.

Hypothesis XI: YAPEENDs who report successful educational experiences will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll in higher education than will be YAPEENDs who report less successful educational experiences.

PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

It has been established that actual reenrollment in higher education is explained by the level of previous educational attainment (Gentemann et al. 1998; Berkovitz & O’Quin, 2007; Hammer, 2003; Woosley et al., 2005). Research appears to clearly indicate that higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of participation in adult education.

Hypothesis XII: YAPEENDs with higher levels of educational attainment will be more likely to express intentions to reenroll than will YAPEENDs with lower levels of educational attainment.

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents, identified from current census data, voter registration lists, and warranty card registrations, were selected to participate in telephone interviews if they had some previous college experience but no degree, were not currently
enrolled in college, and were between the ages of 25 and 34. A total of 599 telephone interviews were completed. The mean age for the sample was just under 30 years old. Females comprised about 52% of the sample. More than 80% of the sample described their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, whereas almost 13% of the sample described their race/ethnicity as African American. All respondents were residents of Detroit, Michigan or its suburbs, a metropolitan statistical area of over four million individuals. The percentages of minorities in this sample was roughly equivalent to those reported in census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

The dependent variable, intention to return, was measured using a 5-point scale. Respondents who chose the midpoint choice were dropped from the analysis. Therefore, the final sample for analyses included 208 respondents who definitely stated intentions to return, and 255 who stated they did not intend to return. Of the 9,269 individuals who agreed to participate in the interview, 646 met all criteria for the survey. Of those respondents, 599 answered all relevant items on the survey.

**Instrument**

The survey contained both demographic and psychographic items that previous research had established were related to intentions to return to college. Two versions of the survey were administered, one designed for adults who stated an intention to return to college and the other designed for those who did not intend to return. Verb tense constituted the only difference between these surveys. Before administering the survey, summative scales were developed to represent perceptions about barriers faced including finances (FINANCE), time (TIME), as well as motivators associated with perceptions of the importance of education (IMPORTANT), and an estimate of previous success in college (SUCCESS).

Items measuring demographic variables included marital status (PARTNERED), number of children (CHILD), layoff history (LAYOFF), minority status (MINORITY), full-time employment status (FULL-TIME), previous credits earned (CREDITS), AGE, INCOME, and GENDER.

**Procedure**

A commercial survey company administered interviews by telephone. Potential respondents were asked their ages, whether they had attended college without completing a degree, and whether they were currently enrolled in college. Each of these items served as filters for the selection of respondents. Interviews stopped for respondents who indicated that they were not between 25 and 34 years of age, had not attended college, were currently enrolled in college, or had completed a degree.

Binary logistic regression tested the hypotheses. Binary logistic regression is recommended in analyses in which a binary dependent variable is to be predicted from independent variables, regardless of whether they are continuous, discrete, or
a combination of both (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). With 13 independent variables, heuristics for minimal sample size called for at least 130 cases of the rarer of the levels of the dependent variable (Garson, 2009). In this instance, the rarer of the two levels contained 208 cases.

Data Analysis

Independent variables were centered for the analyses. As evidence of an absence of multi-collinearity, no variance inflation factor (VIF) for any variable was greater than two. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated acceptable levels of convergent and discriminant validity for the model. The CFI was 93.9 and the RMSEA was .056. Both of these indices indicate a reasonable, but not strong fit of the model to the data (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Average variances extracted (AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) measure the variance explained by a latent construct taking into account the variance due to random measurement error. These ranged from .58 to .78, all above the minimum value of .50 considered adequate measures of discriminant validity (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991). Composite reliabilities measure scale reliabilities and assess the internal consistency of the latent constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These ranged from .70 to .80, all equal to or greater than the recommended minimum value of .70 for these measures (Bagozzi & Phillips, 1991).

As suggested by Bagozzi and Phillips (1991), nested models of the correlations among pairs of variables were compared to further test discriminant validity. A chi-square difference test determined whether the constrained-to-unity pairs of constructs and unconstrained pairs of constructs significantly differed (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). For all pairs, the chi-square test between the two pairs was at least 3.84, indicating discriminant validities for all pairs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

Table 1 presents the variables and their measures, as well as average variances extracted and composite reliabilities for the four latent constructs.

RESULTS

The omnibus tests of model coefficients were significant, \( \chi^2 (13, \; N = 443) = 119.34, \; p < .001 \), indicating that the predictive ability of the proposed model was greater than that of the model described by the intercept alone. The Hosmer and Lemeshow \( \chi^2 \) statistic was not significant, \( \chi^2 (8, \; N = 443) = 13.53, \; p > .05 \). This statistic tests the hypothesis that the difference between observed and expected events in the data is simultaneously zero for subgroups of 10 observations (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). The lack of significance for this statistic indicates adequate fit of our model to the data.

The classification table indicated that 73% of the cases were correctly classified. The proportional-by-chance-accuracy rate for this classification was 62%. 
Table 1. Latent Constructs (with Average Variances Extracted; Composite Reliabilities) and Demographic Measures

**FINANCE: (AVE; .78; CR; .70)**
You left college for financial reasons. (Reverse)
Family finances prevent you from returning to college. (Reverse)
You do not believe you could receive financial aid to return to college. (Reverse)

**TIME: (AVE; .62; CR; .73)**
You could not fit college classes around your work schedule. (Reverse)
You do not have the time to return to college. (Reverse)

**IMPORTANT: (AVE; .72; CR; .80)**
A college education is important for a person's success.
To make a good living you need a college education.

**SUCCESS: (AVE; .51; CR; .74)**
You performed as well academically as you had expected.
You were academically successful at the last college you attended.
You left college because you did not have to study skills necessary for college.
(Reverse)

**MINORITY:**
You would best identify your race or ethnicity as? Majority = 0

**GENDER:**
Your gender is? Female = 0

**AGE:**
Your age in years is?

**FULL-TIME:**
You are employed full-time? No = 0

**LAYOFF:**
Have you experienced a layoff in the last two years? No = 0

**INCOME:**
Five ranges of income levels.

**MARRIED:**
What is your partnered status? Single = 0

**CHILD:**
Number of children under 10 years.

**CREDITS:**
Five ranges of credits earned.

**Intention:**
Likelihood of returning to college in the near future? No = 0
This percentage represents the accuracy rate attributable to chance multiplied by 1.25. It is considered to be the minimum predictive percentage for meaningful classification results (Garson, 2009).

Seven variables were associated with a greater likelihood that respondents would state the intention to reenroll in higher education: minority status (odds ratio [OR] = 2.75, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 1.57 to 4.81); being younger (OR = .89, CI = .82 to .97); working full-time (OR = 1.79, CI = 1.02 to 3.14); having been laid-off (OR = .28, CI = .14 to .57); being single (OR = .50, CI = .30 to .84); believing education is important (OR = 2.00, CI = 1.56 to 2.58); and credits earned (OR = 1.37, CI = 1.10 to 1.72). Table 2 presents the results from the logistic regression model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>1.01**</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>0.58*</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>3.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Layoff</td>
<td>1.26***</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>-0.69**</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>1.26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Important</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2.58</td>
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<td>Success</td>
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<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Credits</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.82</td>
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</table>

**Notes:** \( \chi^2 (13, N = 443) = 119.34; p < .001. \)

*\( p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. \)

Intention: No = 0.
Minority: Majority = 0.
Gender: Female = 0.
Layoff: No = 0.
Partnered: No = 0.
Full-time: No = 0.
DISCUSSION

In our study, minorities are more likely to state the intention to reenroll than are majority group members. This finding conflicts with conclusions from previous research (DesJardins et al., 2006; Johnson, 2006; Woosley et al., 2005). Kimmel and McNeese (2006) have noted that minority students express more motivations and commitments to learning. That may provide some explanation for our findings. Regardless of what may be driving minority stopouts’ intentions to reenroll, minorities are attending college in record numbers. The percentage of minority students in higher education is now more than 32% and growing (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Even among 25 to 34 year olds, younger individuals are more likely to intend to reenroll in college. As the models of student retention predict, maturity may imply more family responsibilities and job constraints (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Likewise, from an economic perspective, students approaching middle age may believe that lifetime payoffs from education are outweighed by the costs (Becker, 1964).

Counter to our hypothesis, full-time workers were more likely to intend to reenroll. Pressures from jobs to improve knowledge, skills, and abilities may be motivating full-time workers to return to school. Not surprisingly, workers experiencing a recent layoff were more likely to intend to reenroll in school. This trend has been identified nationally, but may have been amplified in a sample of young adults residing in the state with the highest unemployment rate in the nation at the time of the study. As found by most previous research, former students who are single are more likely to state an intention to reenroll. Supporting the importance of Tinto’s (1993) concept of goal commitment, respondents who believe education is important are more likely to intend to reenroll. Previous credits earned, a measure of academic integration and an input into an economic costs-benefits analysis, also predict reenrollment.

Other hypotheses, based on relatively robust previous findings, failed to be supported, including those predicting negative effects from time constraints, financial constraints, lower incomes, number of children, and previous success in college. These factors did not differentiate stopouts who intended to reenroll from those who did not. Finances, time constraints, and academic success may have been significant determinants of stopout behaviors in studies of populations other than young adults, but our research indicates these factors do not predict differences between the intentions of stopouts and stayouts.

Some previous research has indicated significant interactions. We included interaction terms for gender with marital status and children and minority status with gender, income, and financial difficulties in early runs of the model, but these were not significant predictors of intentions to reenroll. They also worsened the fit of the model to the data, and they were not included in the final analysis.
Policy Implications

The United States has lost its position as the country with the highest percentage of young adults with college attainment. It has fallen from first to twelfth, and the administration in Washington continues to urge Americans to seek more education (de Vise, 2010). Job prospects, including better pay and benefits, are connected to postsecondary educational attainment, and those benefits open the door to additional training and access to technology (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).

Our research has identified traits of young adults who want to return to college and complete postsecondary education. This identification has important implications for recruitment. As an estimate of the size of the population of former students who might reenroll, Grimes and Antworth (1993) report that 57% of those who withdrew from one community college intended to reenroll at the same college. Bonham and Luckie (1993) report a higher percentage, with more than 70% indicating intentions to return.

Younger adults who have completed more credits toward a degree are more likely to state the intention to return. They are also more likely to be single and displaced from a job. Because they agree that college is important for success, they require less information about the need for education. This frees policymakers and universities to invest in the tools and mechanisms to help connect college into the lives of these motivated adults.

Young adult learners are more likely to have experienced career changes, such as layoffs or obsolescence of skill and knowledge sets. More importantly, this group has experienced college education previously. From this perspective, they are less naïve about the realities of higher education. They understand that educational institutions differ significantly in their affordability, academic requirements, rigors, and social norms. Given these differences, traditional admissions processes and other campus structures are not the most efficient mechanism to convert them to enrolled students. First-year freshmen and their high-school counselors spend considerable effort assembling application data, thinking about majors, ordering standardized test scores, and providing academic transcripts. Previously enrolled students may not need these services or may need modified versions of these services.

In general, stopouts do not have similar infrastructures to assist them with their unique needs. Among recommendations to support returning adult learners would be to develop resources and tools for this subpopulation, such as one-stop centers that provide support for administrative tasks to expedite the return to college. In addition, these adult learners need assistance to reintegrate into the college mindset, through seminars or orientation programs that include updating technology skills, time management practices, goal setting, and study habits. Service programs, such as those already established for veterans, might serve as models for young adult students returning to college.
Specifically, laid-off workers must deal with the fact that many educational programs take longer than the time required to find a new job. This group, as well as full-time workers, would benefit from online classes and flexible class schedules in order to reduce time to complete degree requirements while providing outcomes that provide easy transition either back into the workplace or career advancements. As community colleges and trade schools have shown, the needs of these groups might be better served by emphasis on targeted certificate programs, rather than 2- or 4-year degrees.

Similarly, Wilson (2007) argues that minority students are more successful if there is adequate social support and networking specifically established for that population. Single and laid-off workers should benefit from similar programs as they reintegrate into the educational environment.

These same subgroups are market segments for targeted advertising and outreach. In particular, targeting minorities, full-time workers, recently laid-off workers, and those who have significant numbers of credits would be efficient and cost effective.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Among limitations of our research, we examined stopouts and stayouts in one metropolitan area. Admittedly, our findings may not be generalizable to other areas of the country. At the time of this study, the Detroit metropolitan area was experiencing serious economic pain. We cannot estimate how these high unemployment rates and multiple plant closures may have influenced the results.

Furthermore, although the study was specifically directed toward identifying stopouts and their intentions, the sponsoring agencies required information that increased the length of the instrument and limited the number of items per construct. Assumedly, more observed items for each latent construct would have created stronger scales.

As pointed out before, explaining reenrollment in higher education is represented by a relatively small stream of research. Work in this area (e.g., Horn, 1998; Johnson, 2006; Stratton et al., 2008; Woosley, 2004; Woosley et al., 2005) has provided the groundwork for future research of reenrollment as separate and distinct from withdrawal and persistence behaviors. We recommend a redirection of studies toward research for which the study of stopouts is the main objective. We also recommend further research attempting to replicate or refute findings from this study that contradicted or do not confirm previous research findings (i.e., minority status, income, and gender).

REFERENCES


Direct reprint requests to:

Kim Schatzel, Ph.D.
Dean and Professor of Marketing
College of Business
The University of Michigan–Dearborn
19000 Hubbard Drive
Dearborn, MI 48128
e-mail: schatzel@umd.umich.edu