

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 440

HE 033 038

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TITLE Factors Associated with Retention in a Distance-Based Liberal Arts Program.  
PUB DATE 1999-00-00  
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the North East Association for Institutional Research Conference (26th, Newport, RI, November 1999).  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Academic Persistence; Access to Education; Adult Education; College Attendance; Degrees (Academic); \*Distance Education; Dropout Research; Enrollment Management; \*External Degree Programs; Higher Education; Independent Study; Institutional Characteristics; \*Liberal Arts; Majors (Students); Nontraditional Education; Open Universities; School Demography; \*School Holding Power; Student Attrition; Student Characteristics  
IDENTIFIERS \*Regents College NY

## ABSTRACT

This study, conducted by Regents College (New York), a virtual university founded to serve the needs of adult learners, sought to determine factors associated with student retention in an external degree program. Assessment data for students enrolled in the Regents College undergraduate liberal arts program was derived solely from the student database for cohorts over a time period from July 1988 through June 1998. A wide range of demographic, academic, financial, and administrative variables that might be related to retention were examined. The study found that retention in the liberal arts program was influenced by demographic characteristics such as educational background, ethnicity, gender, military status, and the number and types of credits transferred in by the student. Graduation rates for Regents College bachelor of liberal arts degree seekers were found to be higher than those for nontraditional students nationally. (Contains 14 references.) (CH)

# FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH RETENTION IN A DISTANCE-BASED LIBERAL ARTS PROGRAM<sup>1</sup>

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## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH RETENTION IN A DISTANCE-BASED LIBERAL ARTS PROGRAM<sup>1</sup>

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Student retention has been a troubling issue for administrators and faculty at institutions of higher education especially for non-traditional students. A recent study of this issue published by the National Center for Education Statistics (Horn & Carroll, 1996) indicated that 31% of non-traditional students in baccalaureate programs attain a degree within 5 years. This figure is significantly lower than the 54% this same report cites for degree attainment among traditional students. There is a significant literature on the topic of student retention. Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) influential work on retention is often cited, but others have developed models and researched the topic as well (cf. Adelman, 1999; Astin, 1975, 1993; Horn, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Regents College, America's First Virtual University, is a non-traditional academic institution founded in 1971 to serve the needs of adult learners. The college is virtual in its approach to learning, recognizing that what a person knows is more important than where or how that knowledge was acquired. The mission of the College is to help remove some of the barriers that exist for working adults in their quest for higher education, while maintaining rigorous standards of academic excellence. The College serves a student body of approximately 17,000 students and develops examinations taken for college credit by over 40,000 students annually. Over 1000 colleges and universities accept Regents College examinations for credit towards their degrees.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the November 1999 North East Association for Institutional Research conference, Providence, RI.

The typical enrolled Regents College undergraduate is a 41 year-old adult learner who is employed full-time and has competing family and work obligations. Approximately one-quarter of the Colleges' student body is from historically underrepresented groups in higher education. Regents College students move frequently, travel frequently, have changed their academic focus since their initial studies and are motivated to complete their degrees either to improve their employment situation or for personal satisfaction and enrichment. These motivations (career enhancement and personal enrichment) have been documented as the main reasons why adults seek participation in higher education (Cross, 1981; Kim, Collins, Stowe, & Chandler, 1995; Maehl, 1999; Nesler & Hanner, 1998).

The external degree programs are assessment based; the College offers no traditional classroom instruction at the undergraduate level. Regents College uses both direct and indirect assessment methods for evaluating students' knowledge and awarding credit. Direct assessments consist of Regents College standardized written and performance examinations. The college makes use of other types of assessments as well, including portfolios and special assessments. Indirect assessments of students learning, and the associated transfer of credits not obtained directly through the college's assessment, are dependent on explicit quality assurance frameworks. These frameworks include regional accreditation, American Council on Education (ACE) programs, and other special programs that have been evaluated by Regents College faculty. Credits acquired by students at regionally accredited institutions are usually accepted for transfer by Regents College and will be applied towards the student's degree requirements as is appropriate. ACE evaluates military education and training for credit, as well as training

and education offered by business and industry, and other credit-by-examination programs. Regents College accepts ACE's credit recommendations in most instances. The credits students acquire or transfer to the college are evaluated against specific degree requirements and general education and degree specific outcome expectations, outlined in the Regents College Outcomes Assessment Framework (Peinovich & Nesler, 1999) as well as the college's catalogs.

The current analyses were conducted to determine empirically what factors are associated with student retention in the Regents College Bachelors Liberal Arts (BLA) program using information from the student database exclusively. Information about these factors could be used to identify profiles of students who are at-risk for withdrawal. The profiles could also provide information useful in the development of interventions for specific student types and could potentially be used for the development of a theoretical model of distance student retention.

#### Method

An extensive evaluation was conducted using computerized records of the entire population of students who enrolled in the BLA program over a ten year period ( $N = 30,287$ ). The enrollment cohorts covered the time period of July 1988 through June 1998 to examine a wide range of demographic, academic, financial, and administrative variables that could potentially be related to retention.

Tracking a cohort through the Regents College system is a slightly different process than at other institutions because the college does not operate on a traditional academic calendar. Students can enroll in the college at any time and can graduate

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whenever they have completed their program of study<sup>2</sup>. The college does not use a system of classifying students by class year – instead students are given updated information about their academic standing each time they acquire additional college credits towards their degrees (generally by completing traditional courses at accredited campus-based programs, taking college-level proficiency examinations, or by completing distance learning courses or courses offered through the world wide web by regionally accredited colleges and universities).

Students are clustered by the fiscal year in which they enroll to create a cohort. If a student does not graduate within one calendar year from the time they enrolled, they are asked to pay a continuation fee to maintain their enrollment. Individuals who either graduate or pay a continuation fee on their anniversary date are considered to have been retained. Students who withdraw either by requesting a refund or by not paying their continuation fee are considered to have withdrawn. The vast majority of students who withdraw from the college do so by non-payment of their continuation fee – a type of passive withdrawal.

Table 1 indicates that student retention rates have increased slightly over time but seem to have remained steady over the past few years. Aggregating years 1988-89 through 1996-97 indicates that 16,783 of the students who enrolled in the Regents College Bachelors Liberal Arts program had graduated by 1998 and another 1,891 were still enrolled, for an aggregate retention rate of 67.9%. Retention has been slowly increasing over time, from a low of 61.6% retained in fiscal year 1988-89 to high of 88.5% retained in fiscal year 1997-98 (the 1997-98 figure is high due to the high

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<sup>2</sup> Graduation actually occurs on a monthly basis, providing students with 12 times during the year to graduate. This graduation policy is in effect so that students can have an opportunity to pursue career and

percentage of students who were still enrolled at the time the data were extracted from the student database). Aggregating years 1988-89 through 1996-97 indicates that 61% of the students who enrolled in the Regents College Bachelors Liberal Arts program had graduated by 1998 and another 6.9% were still enrolled, for an aggregate retention rate of 67.9%. These figures compare favorably against those reported for non-traditional students pursuing baccalaureate degrees.

**Table 1.**  
**Enrollment Status of Regents College Liberal Arts Students by Fiscal Year they Enrolled.**

	Fiscal Year										Total (Overall)	Total (to 96-97)
	88-89	89-90	90-91	91-92	92-93	93-94	94-95	95-96	96-97	97-98		
Withdrawn (n)	1118	935	839	951	1032	934	1042	1132	839	317	9140	8822
(%)	(38.4)	(36.0)	(30.9)	(31.2)	(34.2)	(32.0)	(31.8)	(31.3)	(24.7)	(11.5)	(30.2)	(32.1)
Length of Enroll.	19.61	20.01	19.98	20.23	16.67	16.82	14.36	11.37	8.74	2.94	15.94	16.40
Graduated (n)	1768	1623	1830	2033	1895	1860	1995	2038	1741	826	17609	16783
(%)	(60.8)	(62.5)	(67.3)	(66.7)	(62.8)	(63.7)	(61.0)	(56.3)	(51.3)	(30.0)	(58.1)	(61.0)
Length of Enroll.	15.18	14.48	13.46	12.66	12.63	11.54	10.08	8.98	7.48	3.80	11.49	11.79
Enrolled (n)	24	38	49	66	92	124	236	449	813	1611	3538	1891
(%)	(0.8)	(1.5)	(1.8)	(2.2)	(3.0)	(4.2)	(7.2)	(12.4)	(24.0)	(58.5)	(11.7)	(6.9)
Grand Total	2910	2596	2718	3050	3019	2918	3273	3619	3393	2754	30287	27496
Percent Retained	61.6	64.0	69.1	68.8	65.8	68.0	68.2	68.7	75.3	88.5	69.8	67.9

Note: *Length of Enroll* refers to the average length of enrollment in months. Figures in parentheses reflect the percentage of individuals within a given fiscal year who fall into each category.

Table 2 reports retention rates by previous educational attainment, which was significantly associated with retention. Adult students already holding degrees are sometimes interested in receiving a degree in a different field in order to advance in their careers or change their career paths. For students who enrolled between 1988-89 and 1996-97, educational background was significantly associated with retention. Students with doctoral degrees had the highest retention of any group (74.2%), and students with foreign degrees had the lowest retention rate (50.6%).

**Table 2.**  
**Retention Percentages for Students who Enrolled From 1988-89 Through 1996-97 Based**

other opportunities without having to wait for a December or May conferral date.

on Educational Background.

<u>Education:</u> <u>Level:</u>	<u>High School</u> <u>Graduate</u>	<u>Certificate</u> <u>or Diploma</u>	<u>Associates</u> <u>Degree</u>	<u>Bachelors</u> <u>Degree</u>	<u>Doctoral</u> <u>Degree</u>	<u>Foreign</u> <u>Degree</u>
% Graduated	61.5	45.2	62.9	68.8	72.2	41.0
% Retained	68.7	57.0	69.9	70.7	74.2	50.6
<b>Total N</b>	<b>6208</b>	<b>1,195</b>	<b>8,226</b>	<b>1,146</b>	<b>435</b>	<b>136</b>

Note: Only very few students (less than 1% of the total sample) reported having either less than 4 years of high school or a masters degree. Thus, these groupings are not included in the table.

Table 3 reports retention rates by racial/ethnic categories. As can be seen in the table, race was significantly associated with retention for students who enrolled between 1988-89 and 1996-97. Caucasian students comprised the largest group of students (79.9%), and had the highest retention rate (69.8%). Students from other racial/ethnic groups had lower retention rates, ranging from 59.2% for Asian/Pacific Islanders to 63.4% for Native Americans.

Table 3.  
Retention Percentages for 1988-89 Through 1996-97 Enrollees Based on Self-Reported Racial/Ethnic Background from Enrollment Form.

<u>Race/Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Caucasian</u> <u>/White</u>	<u>African</u> <u>American</u>	<u>Asian/</u> <u>Pacific Isl</u>	<u>Latina/o</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Native</u> <u>Amer.</u>
Percent Graduated	63.2	51.6	50.2	55.5	48.4	55.7
Percent Retained	69.8	59.9	59.2	61.8	62.7	63.4
<b>Total category N</b>	<b>14,873</b>	<b>1,453</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>897</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>189</b>

Note: Figures are reported based on students' self reported ethnicity at their time of enrollment.

Retention rates also varied by gender. Overall, retention for female students who enrolled between 1988-89 and 1996-97 was 64.7% (55.9% graduation rate), as compared to 69.9% (63.3% graduation rate) for male students enrolling during this time period. Male students comprised the majority of BLA enrollments (70.2%) during this time period.

Approximately 42% of the students who enrolled in the BLA program at Regents



College between 1988-89 and 1996-97 were in the military. The retention rate for students in the military, 75.0% (69.8% graduation rate), was much higher than those for students not in the military, 62.9% (54.6% graduation rate). This was one of the more dramatic differences found in this study.

Additional analyses were conducted examining three types of variables - demographic, financial and administrative, and academic. A discriminant analysis was conducted using only graduates and withdrawn students. The results of this analysis revealed that several variables were useful in predicting group membership. These included: the number of upper level courses taken, the number of upper level arts and science credits students had at their time of enrollment, the number of social science credits students had at enrollment, military background, and GPA at enrollment. These findings largely indicate that academic preparation at the time of enrollment is related to retention at Regents College – those students with more college experience, and therefore more credits, were more likely to be retained. Military students and students with higher GPAs were also more likely to be retained.

### Discussion

Retention of students in distance education programs is a complex issue, especially in the case of non-traditional students. Theories in higher education have attempted to tackle this issue, and researchers have used a variety of methods to study factors associated with student retention. This study is limited in that only variables available on a student database were examined. The results of this analysis should be viewed within the scope of previous research in this area. Retention in the Liberal Arts program at Regents College will be influenced by student characteristics as well as local

environmental factors, such as family support, employer support, the student's health and financial situation, regional and national environmental factors, such as economic conditions, the job market within the student's field, as well as perceptions of service quality offered by Regents College and the availability of alternative educational opportunities.

The results of this study indicate that certain demographic characteristics are associated with retention in the Regents College BLA program. These include the educational background, ethnicity, gender, military status, and the number and type of credits the students transfer in. It should be noted that graduation rates for the Regents College BLA program are substantially higher than those reported for non-traditional students nationally. The data generated in this report provide some information about the factors associated with student retention. Exit interviews with former students are currently underway to examine some of the issues that have been described in the literature as related to adult student retention.

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