

Retention of Vocational Rehabilitation Customers in Community College

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This study examines relationships between involvement of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and engagement of VR counselors on the persistence of VR customers in community college settings and successful work placement. Data was drawn from the Longitudinal Study of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (LSVRSP) for analysis in this research. This is the first examination of information from the LSVRSP to determine the impact of vocational rehabilitation services on clients who participate in community college education and training programs. This study is of relevance to rehabilitation counselors in the private sector engaged in placing clients who have received rehabilitation education and training services, especially those served under the Ticket to Work.

Introduction

Post-secondary education provides a key to competitive employment for persons with disabilities. The State/Federal Vocational Rehabilitation system supports many of its customers by funding community college experiences, and by having periodic interaction between counselor and customer. Community colleges need to find ways to ensure that students with disabilities reach their educational and vocational goals. There is a tremendous need to assess factors, which contribute to the persistence of students with disabilities in post-secondary education. Retention research has suggested that students receiving support services offered in post-secondary institutions, has produced favorable outcomes. (Tincani, 2004). However, the research has yet to examine the variables related to persistence outside of the institution for students who are enrolled in a community college, identified as having a disability, and receiving support services from State/Federal Vocational Rehabilitation Programs. This document represents the first comprehensive examination of these important issues.

This study of the relationship between VR services and engagement and persistence in the community college setting was based in The Longitudinal Study of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (LSVRSP), a study (mandated by Congress and con-

tained in Section 14 of the 1992 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act), that Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International conducted for the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). It was initiated in the fall 1992, with data collection beginning in January 1995, and completed in January 2000. Its purpose was to address key questions of interest to Congress, RSA, state VR agencies, and consumers about the performance of the State/Federal VR program. The LSVRSP tracked a nationally representative sample (n=8,500+) of applicants and consumers of VR services for their VR participation and post-VR experiences for three years following exit from the program (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis 2003).

Review of Literature

Social Integration, the theoretical model of persistence developed by Vincent Tinto (1975), proposed that students who were not connected socially to the institution had a greater risk of dropping out than those who were connected. Social integration can influence persistence in the nontraditional student through the inclusion of good academic advising and interacting with faculty and peers outside of the classroom. The higher a student is academically and socially integrated into the institution, the more likely he/she is to persist (Tinto, 1993).

Retention studies conducted regarding the persistence of students enrolled within 4-year institutions are not all suited to the population of students who chose to enroll in public 2-year institutions. In studying college students in the 21st century, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) published a 20 year synthesis of studies that analyzed the impact of college on students, which in their words were "largely based on the "traditional," white undergraduate college students age 18-22 who attended four-year institutions full-time, who lived on campus, who didn't work, and who had few, if any, family responsibilities" (1998, p151). In 1985, Bean & Metzner modified Tinto's (1975) persistence theory to include the nontraditional student defined as one who is older than 24, commutes to and from campus, is enrolled as a part-time student, or a combination of any three of these factors. As nontraditional students experience external conflicting demands of employment, family obligations, and persisting toward their academic goals, they may have limited time to remain on campus.

Bean & Metzner (1985) identified environmental pull as a retention variable, which affects persistence due to external demands placed on students. They identified environmental variables to include finances, employment, family obligations, ability to transfer, and encouragement from family. According to Bean and Metzner, such variables have a greater impact on retention than academic variables identified as attendance, courses, studying, advising, and academic goals. Cofer & Somers (2001) note that in their study, community college students who persist tend to be older (average 30 years old), while Dworkin (1996) found the average age of community college persisters to be 38 years old. Ethnicity was reported by Grimes & David (1999) to predict difficulties with post-secondary persistence, particularly for members of minority groups who have culturally based attitudes that do not support participation in higher education.

Environmental variables such as employment and family obligations can affect the amount of time that nontraditional students have to spend on campus. Therefore, nontraditional students have minimal interaction with other students, faculty, and college personnel (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p.489). The less time that students spend on campus, the less opportunity they have to become academically and socially integrated within the institution. These characteristics set 2-year community college students apart from the traditional student who is more likely to attend a 4-year institution.

In 1993, Tinto revised his persistence model (1975) to include the external environment and how it impacts the integration of students into the academic and social systems within the institution. This revised model allows for the recognition of support from external re-

lationships. For the purpose of this study, Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model of social integration, the most cited model regarding student attrition within higher education as well the most commonly tested (Metz, 2004-2005), was redefined as engagement with a rehabilitation counselor.

Students with Disabilities

Habley and McClanahan (2004) state that economic opportunity is based on earning a college education and those who are lacking that education are at a great disadvantage in obtaining employment and the quality of life that it affords. Although college was the most desired post-school outcome for scores of secondary students with disabilities prior to the passage of the Rehabilitation Act, the pursuit of post-secondary education was not an easily accessible pathway because of the limited physical and programmatic accessibility of the institutions, themselves.

Students with disabilities exhibit the same characteristics of the nontraditional students with the addition of a disability. Members of this sub-community according to Bean and Metzner (1985) are older than 24, commute to and from campus, are part-time students, or have any combination of these three characteristics. Therefore, students with disabilities fall into the sub-community of the nontraditional student and have minimal interaction with other students, faculty, and college personnel (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p.489). The population of nontraditional students has not responded to retention efforts due to other factors that are not related to the characteristics of traditional students. A recent study conducted by Stodden, Conay, & Chang (2003), indicate that most post-secondary institutions are inadequate in assisting students with disabilities.

Although there is a wealth of information collected about students with disabilities who are attending community colleges in the LSVRSP data base, this paper will address three issues relevant to counselors who may function in the private sector. Counselors in the private sector will often be serving clients who have, at some time, received the training from vocational rehabilitation because of their eligibility under Titles II and XVI of the Social Security Act (SSI and SSDI). These clients may now be eligible for private sector services under the Ticket to Work legislation passed in 1999. The LSVRSP data hinges on the personal relationships and services provided by the counselor. It is reasonable to assume that if the engaged activities help in successful completion of a training program, this concept of engagement could also apply to relationships of private sector counselor.

Method

The research questions that guided this study are:

- Does VR's relationship with students who have disabilities who are in community college setting make a difference in their persistence (enrolling the next year)? Does provision of services have a relationship to persistence?
- Is there a relationship between the age of students with disabilities who are VR customers and their persistence (enrolling the next year) in a multi-year community college program?
- Is there a relationship between the ethnicity of students with disabilities who are VR customers and their persistence (enrolling the next year) in a multi-year community college program?

Data Source

To answer the research questions, data for this study were drawn from the Longitudinal Study of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (LSVRSP). The following is taken from the Final Report 1: How Consumer Characteristics Affect Access to, Receipt of, and Outcomes of VR Services (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2003).

Data collection included computer-aided interviews with study participants, abstraction of data from consumer's case records, and mail surveys to VR agencies. A battery of baseline interviews conducted with each study participant at the time of entry into the study obtained information on work history, functioning, vocational interests and attitudes, independence and community integration, and consumer perspectives on their VR participation. A follow-up interview administered for three subsequent years varied according to the individual's stage in the VR process at the time of interview. Records abstraction included consumer characteristics and detailed information on services. Records were abstracted when the consumer entered the study and quarterly until that person exited VR. Agency instruments included mail surveys of office managers in participating VR offices, counselors, and other office staff, as well as a state policies and procedures form. These instruments were administered at initiation and termination of the study's data collection activities, with annual updates from the local office manager surveys.

The data were downloaded from the website, www.lsvrsp.org, which is maintained by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center at Cornell University, and funded by the Department of Education's National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research.

Sample

To address the research questions and to arrive at the sample for this particular study, the data analyzed from LSVRSP, which was composed of nationally representative sample ($n = 8,500$) of consumers receiving VR services, was limited to those who were enrolled within a two-year community college, junior college occupational or academic program. The data file consisted of 2,848 participants. As participants were surveyed several times, the file consisted of duplicate entries. Therefore, the most recent survey dates were selected for the study sample, which resulted in nationally representative sample ($n = 954$) of participants.

With the minimum age of 14 as a requirement to receive VR services, the age of participants studied ranged from 15-61 with a mean age of 32 and a standard deviation of 10.79. As thus, most participants fell within the age range of 21-43 years old.

As reflected by the survey instrument, the ethnic origin of the participants was identified as follows: 87% White, 10% Black, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1% Asian Pacific Islander. Of the 954 participants, 9% identified themselves as being of Hispanic origin. As for the marital status of the participants, 46% reported never being married followed by 27% married, 18.2% divorced, 6.7% separated, and 1.7% were widowed. Additionally, 70% of the participants were enrolled as students within a two-year community college academic or vocational program.

Instrumentation

Study participants were administered the two-year community college program (ETSCP) survey once a year. This survey identified full-time students, their chosen area of concentration/major, and those who were receiving the VR Services as the purchase of community college sponsorship. Participants identified the result of such services as "continued following year, completed degree, dropped out, job placement, or closure in status".

Reliability/validity

The availability of the LSVSRP dataset is both a strength and limitation of the study. The LSVSRP dataset provides a snapshot over a six-year period, which includes persons with disabilities from a variety of approaches with attendance at a two-year community college as one part of a huge data collection activity. It is a national dataset which has an incredible amount of longitudinal information about the participants. Researchers who retrieve data from the set must work with those variables provided, though some "creation" of new variables by creative exploration may be possible. However, the dataset is rich and there is enough of the kind of variables typically put

under scrutiny by post-secondary retention and engagement studies to allow a reasonable study of the subset of students with disabilities to proceed.

Research Method

Based on the purpose of the study, which was to examine the impact that the provision and involvement of rehabilitation services may have on the persistence and case closures of students with disabilities who were enrolled in a two-year community college program, a quantitative descriptive analysis method was chosen. To answer the research questions, Chi Square tests of significance were performed to determine the level of significance present for each variable. This non-parametric test was chosen as it was the simplest and most powerful test of significance to use based on the nature of the dataset as well as the research questions.

Variables

The dependent variables measured in this research include the persistence or retention of subjects with disabilities in community college and case closure. The terms persistence and retention refer to a student re-enrolling in the college the following year (Astin, 1993). Relationships between independent variables of VR involvement – differentiated by the agency's provision of or referral to services only and the provision of or referral to services coupled with periodic counselor/customer interaction (engagement) are explored, as are relationships between persistence or retention and age and ethnicity of customer.

Results

In this subset of data, significance was found for all three research questions. VR provision of services had a significant effect on students persistence in community college ($\chi^2 = 15.755, p > .05$). A significant proportion of older students receiving VR services persisted at a significantly greater rate than the sample of the youngest individuals in the survey ($t = 2.331, p > .05$), and a significant number of Hispanic individuals persisted at a significantly reduced rate compared to the Hispanic portion of the overall sample. ($\chi^2 = 16.021, p > .01$).

Conclusions

This information is important for rehabilitation counselors who work with clients who have received VR services in the past or are presently receiving services because it informs them of the important role that personal interaction has in establishing positive educational and vocational outcomes. Counselors in the

private sector who might be referring clients for training need to know that the quality of their interaction with the client, as confirmed by numerous studies by Vincent Tinto as well as this study, will highly affect the persistence of their clients in finishing the training program. As Tinto notes, intrusive counseling such as that experienced by clients in this data base, including activities such as reporting regularly to the counselor, showing grade reports to the counselor, meeting to maintain full time load, and having clear-cut time limits for completion of educational tasks, will highly impact the outcome. These activities result in a higher likelihood of success in both attaining degrees and certificates.

Even if the private sector counselor is not making the referral for training, the effect of engagement is important for the completion of placement activities in competitive employment. Future articles based on this data base will demonstrate the relationship between counselor engagement and competitive placement.

It is also not unremarkable to find significance among more mature clients, and this applies to both private and public sector. This has been substantiated regularly in the literature and in this study. In terms of minority issues, the lower success rate persistence in Hispanic clients is significant and implies that counselors need to use creative methods in working with Hispanic clients when they refer them to a community college, as the level of intrusion described above was not successful with this population. From a diversity perspective, there was no difference in the success rates of Caucasians and African-American clients. It would appear that causative intrusive academic and rehabilitation counseling produces equally satisfying results among these two populations.

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