

Re-examining Retention as a Measure of Institutional Quality

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Higher Education's low retention rates have been called a "local problem" and a "national disgrace."

Session Overview

Part 1: Defining the Attrition/Retention Issue
Common Terms

Part 2: Resources and Techniques for Understanding Attrition
The Cost of Attrition
Frameworks for Attrition Research
Finding and Using Comparative Data

Part 3: Discussion & Conclusions

Why the Interest in Retention Measures?

- Retention has become a key indicator of and a widely used benchmark for quality
- Attrition is expensive
- “Institutional effectiveness” includes understanding and addressing causes of attrition

Getting Real!

What's Happening on Your Campus?

- Who are your peers? Select the category that best describes your freshman admissions policy.
- How has retention changed on your campus in the last 10 years?

Traditional Definition

Retention: students who continue in their institution or unit over a defined period of time expressed as a percentage or ratio of entering students.

Key Terms

- Drop Out
- Stop Out
- Transfer Out

New Realities

“Last fall I was enrolled in 7 courses.”

(Angie, new Policy Center employee)

3 Internet – each from a different institution

3 Primary Campus

1 Auxiliary Campus

7 courses from 4 institutions

2 campus locations and 3 distance courses

all for graduation credit

all in the same term

Retention: An Obsolete Measure?

Adelman, in *Answers in the Tool Box*: “The core hypothesis: the long tradition of institutional effects research in higher education is outmoded. The engines of its demise lie in student behavior.” (p. 39)

“Institutions may ‘retain’ students, but it’s the *students* who complete degrees, no matter how many institutions they attend. So follow the student, not the institution.” (p. xi)

Cost of Attrition

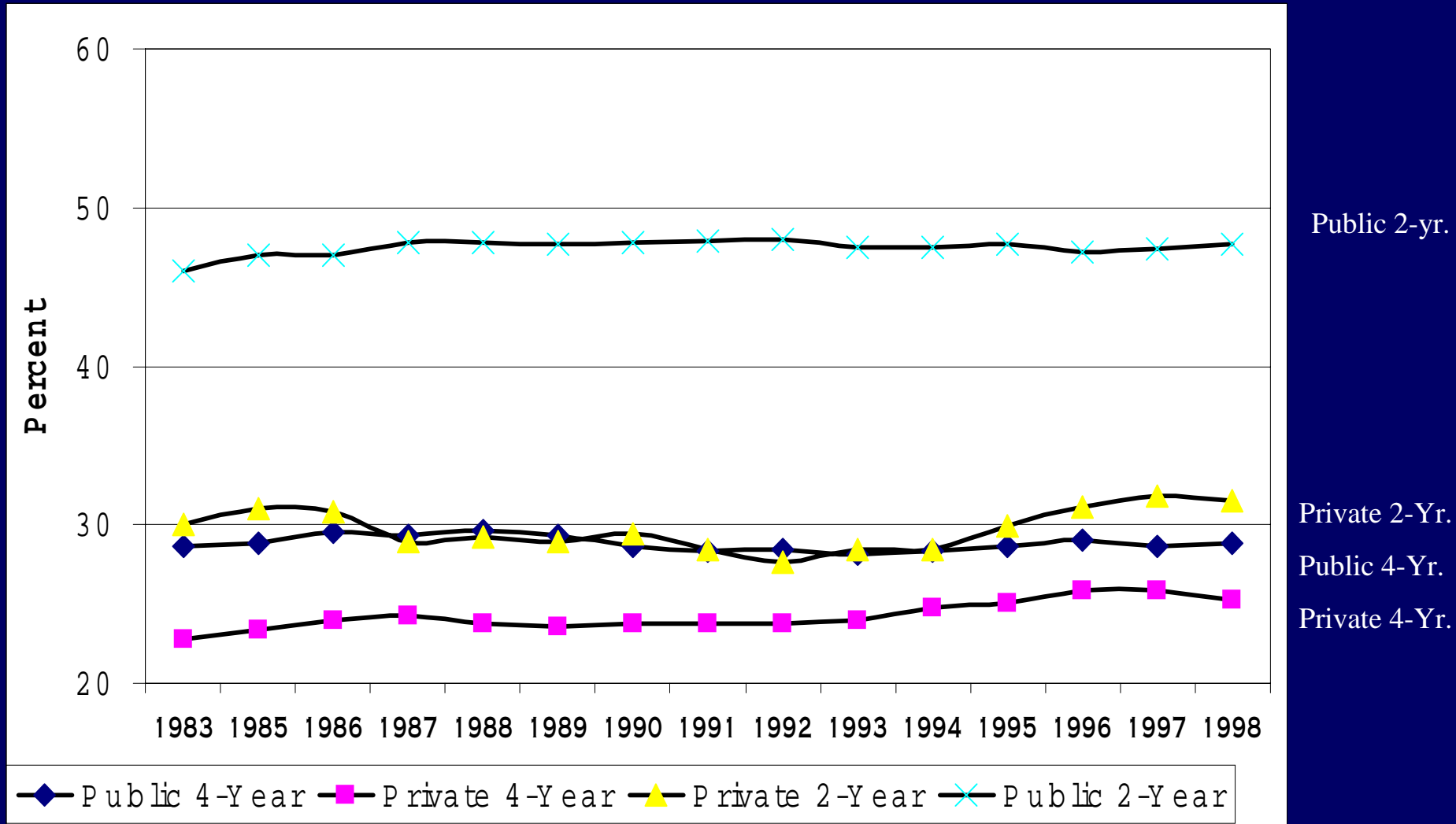
Savings Calculated Over Time

Examples:

Noel Levitz Worksheet

Appalachian State University Example

1st to 2nd Year Attrition Rates by Institutional Type – 15 Year Trends



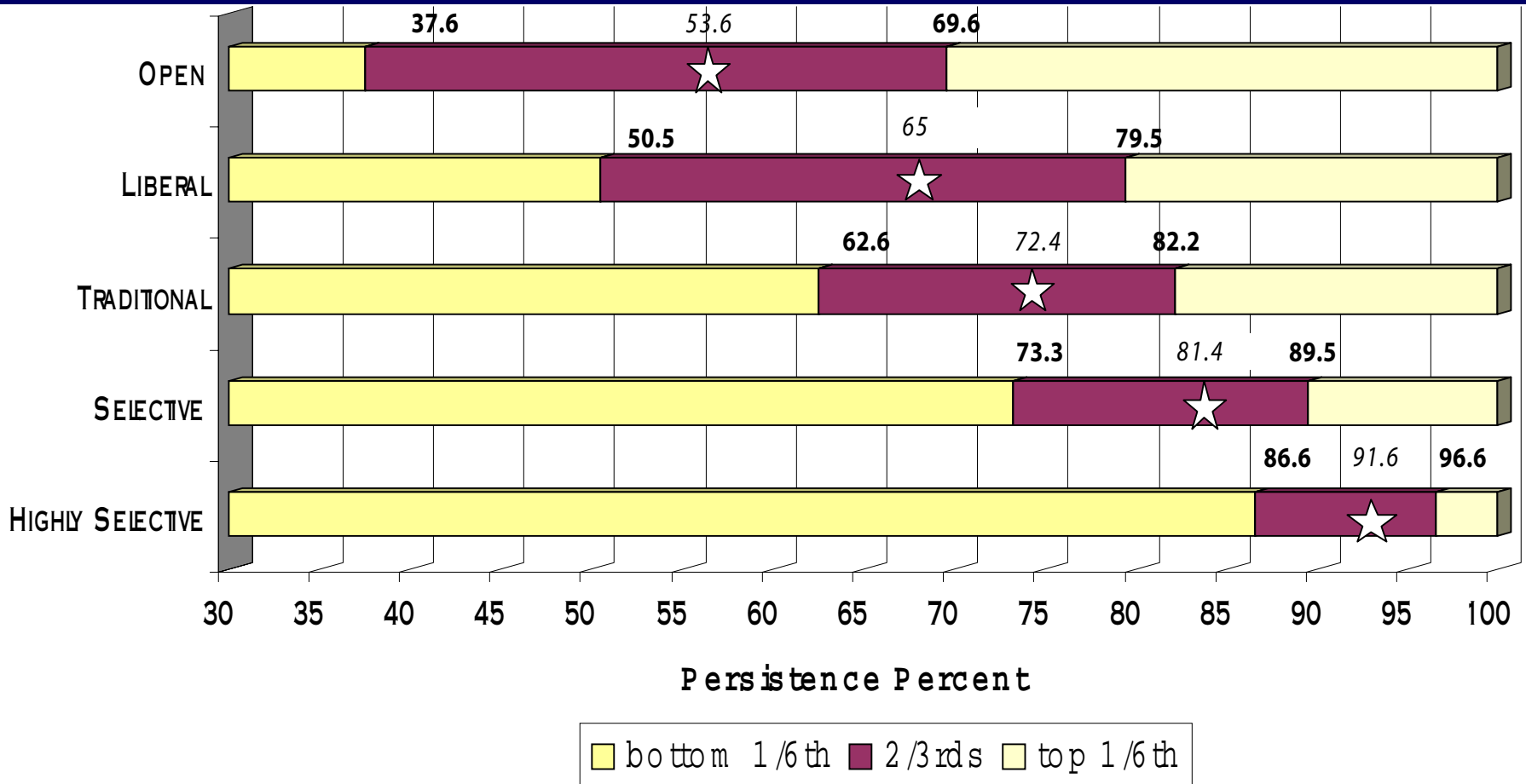
National Persistence Rates, 2001

1st to 2nd Year

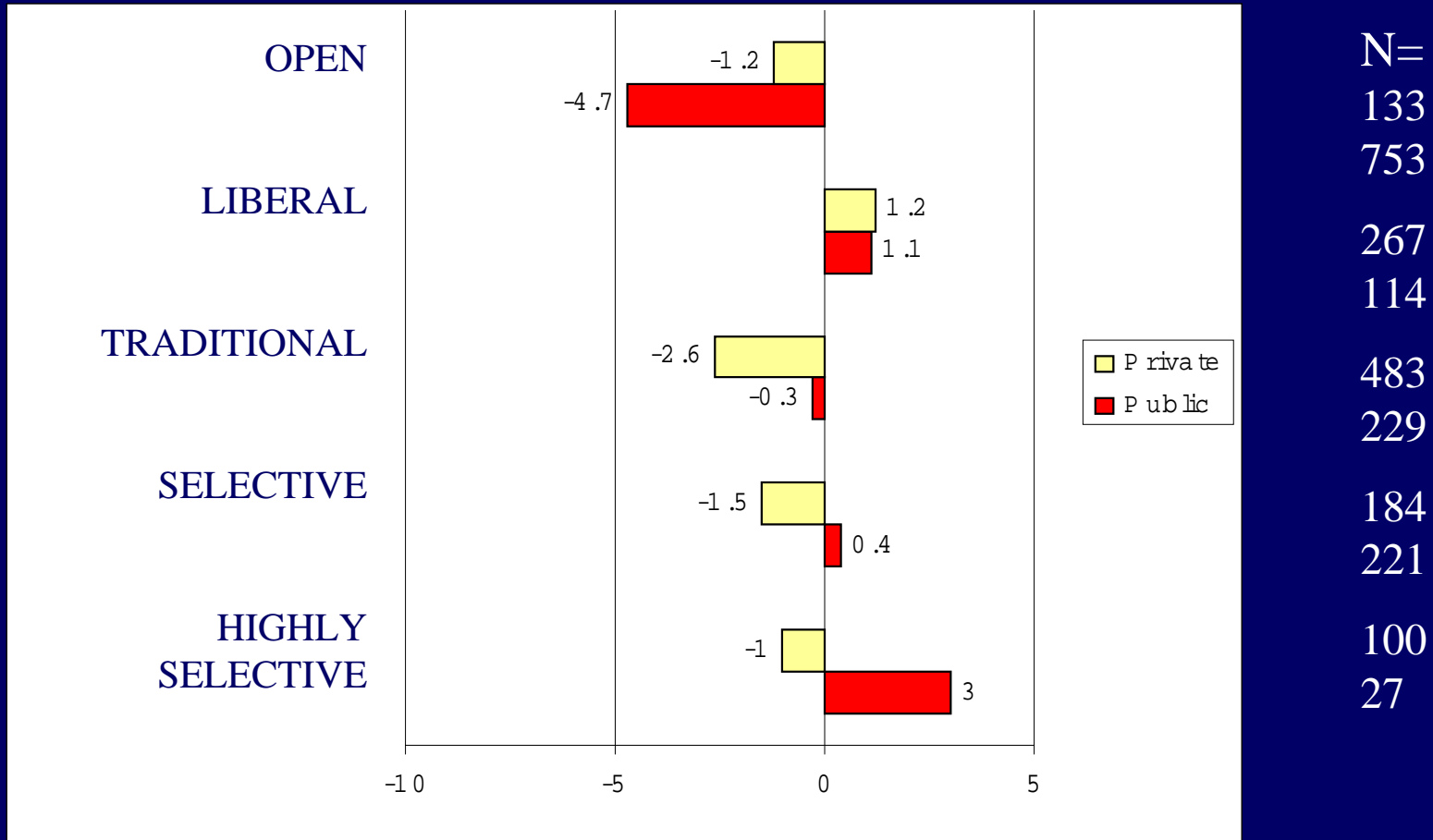
Admissions Selectivity	ACT	SAT	No.	Mean %
Highly Sel.	27-31	1020-1380	127	86.6
Selective	22-27	1030-1220	405	81.4
Traditional	20-23	950-1070	712	72.4
Liberal	18-21	870-990	381	65.0
Open	17-20	830-950	886	53.6
All			2511	67.1

Beyond the “Mean”

Retention Rates by Institutional Type



Percent Change in Mean Persistence Rates 1991 to 2001

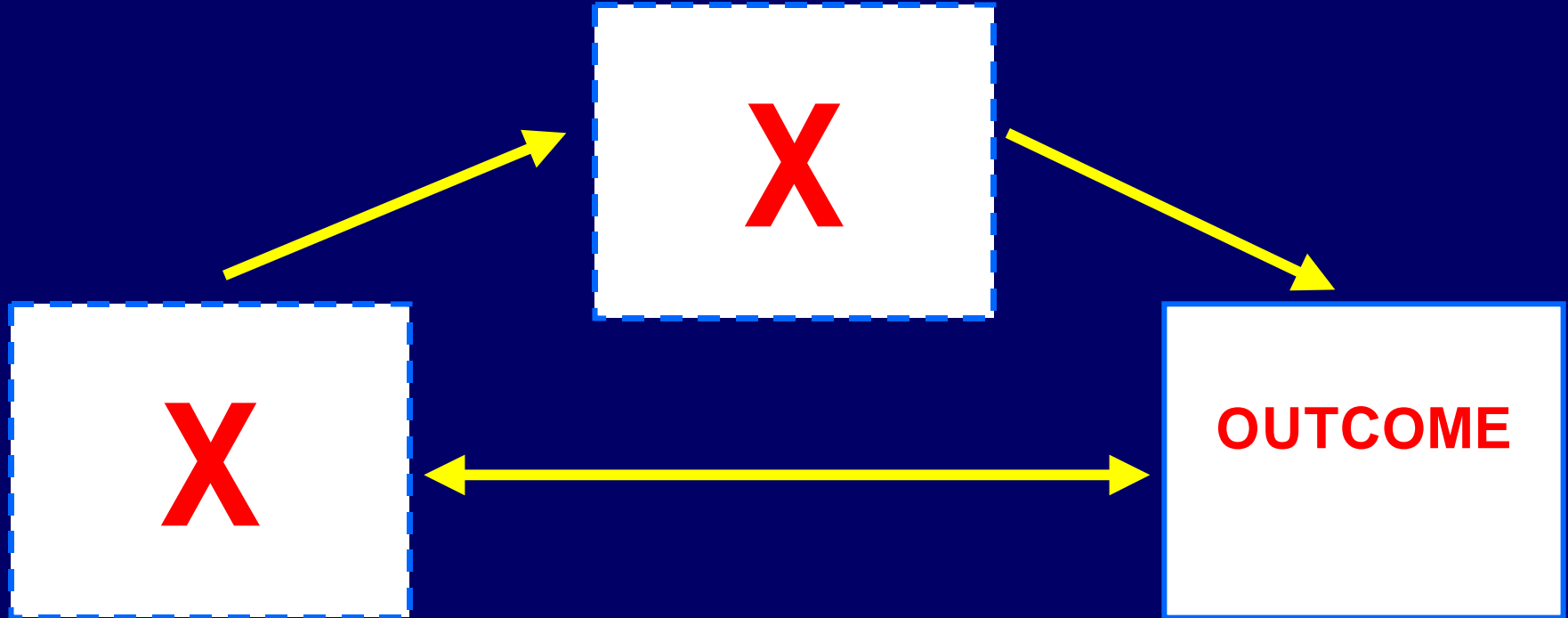


I – E – O Model



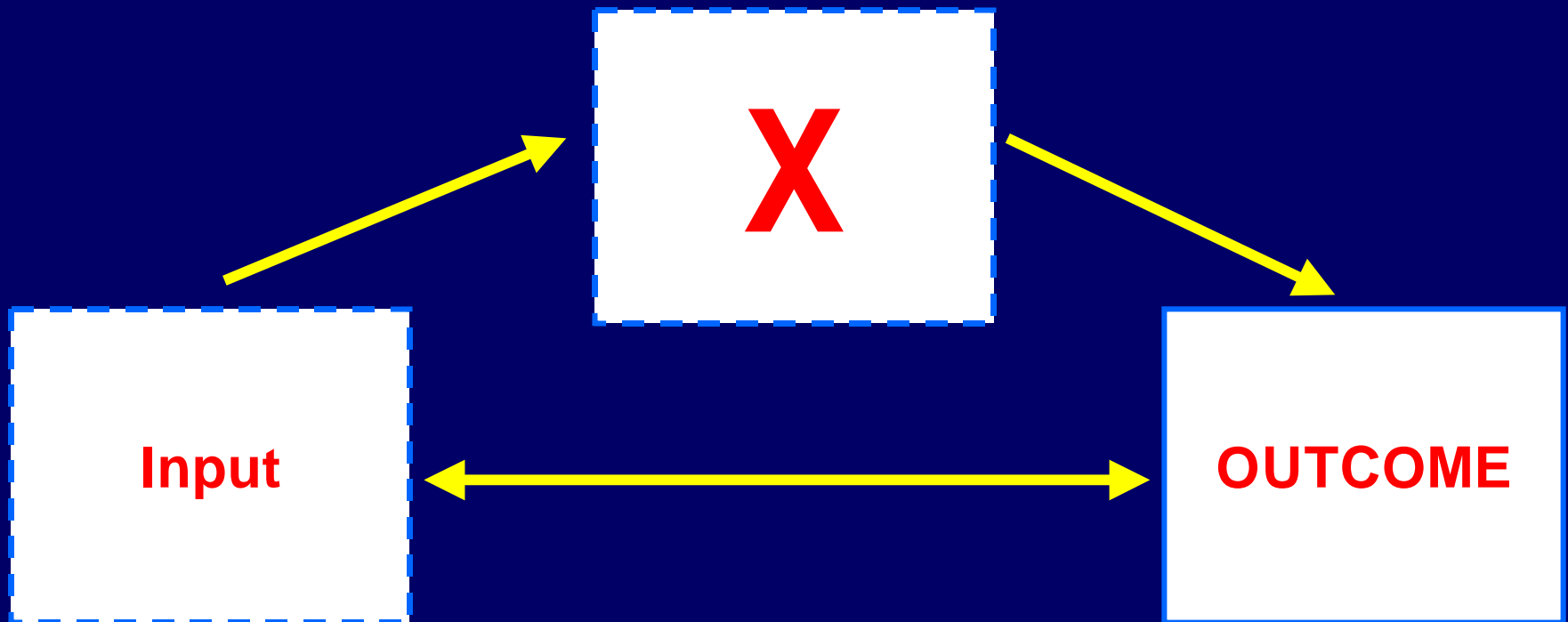
Common Errors in Assessment Designs: An Incomplete I-E-O Model

Outcomes Only Assessment



retention, gpa, graduation rate, etc

Common Errors in Assessment Designs: An Incomplete I-E-O Model Input - Outcome Assessment



Research on Input Measures (1)

Academic Background or “Academic Resources”

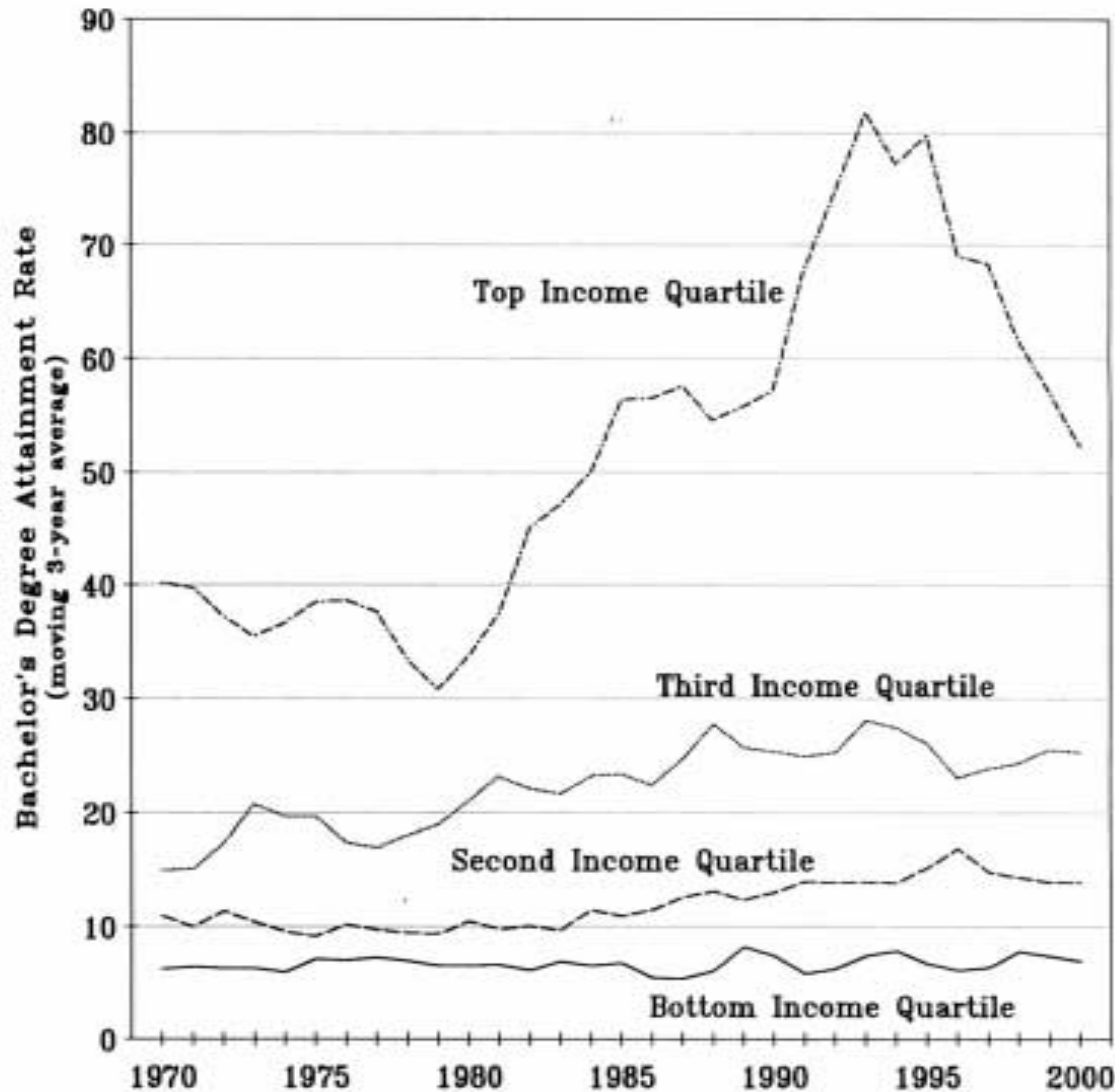
- HS Grades/Rank
- SAT/ACT
- HS Curriculum Intensity (e.g., higher math, foreign language, AP)

Research on Input Measures (2)

Demographics

- Gender
- Race
- Socioeconomic status/family background

Baccalaureate Degree Attainment by Age 24 by Family Income Quartile 1970 - 2000



Top Quartile:
+\$86,222

Third Quartile:
\$59,596 - \$86,222

Second Quartile:
\$33,903 - \$59,595

Bottom Quartile:
\$0 - \$33,902

Research on Input Measures (3)

Goals and Intentions

- Personal Goals
- Academic Goals (e.g., degree aspirations)
- Motivation (academic, social)
- “Receptivity to Support Services” (Noel-Levitz)

Research on Environmental Measures

Institutional Experiences

- Academic Performance
- Faculty/Staff/Peer Interactions
- Noncredit/Extracurricular Activities
- Residence
- Financial Aid/Employment
- Institutional Type (Public/Private)

Actual vs. Predicted Retention Rates

- Adjustment factors
 - Academic Readiness (SAT, HS rank, etc.)
 - Demographics (gender, race, SES)
 - Other (U.S. News' expenditures per student)

Effectiveness assumed when actual retention rate exceeds predicted rate.

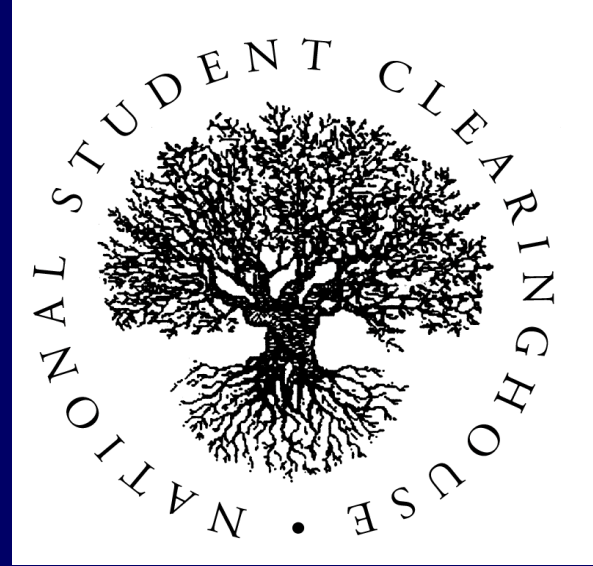
Resources:

- Comparative Data
 - ACT
 - Common Data Set
 - Institutional Exchanges
 - State Systems
 - Consortia & Organizations
- Assessment Surveys
- Enrollment Search

Instruments for Retention Research

- Satisfaction Surveys
 - general
 - special populations
- Needs Analyses
- Surveys of Non-returning students
- Prediction Instruments
 - part of retention management systems
 - based on characteristics
- Surveys Designed for Model Building
 - post hoc match with registrar's records

Enrollment Search



- Electronic access to 30+ million records
- Over 2,300 post-secondary institutions
- 80% of currently enrolled students
- Research Possibilities
 - Individual Student Records via the Web
 - Electronic Roster Data Exchanges (Cohort verification)
 - Concurrent Enrollment Report (Cohort verification)
- Meets Family Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA) Regulations
- Cost: 10 cents X fall headcount - \$250 min
- [HTTP://www.studentclearinghouse.org](http://www.studentclearinghouse.org)

Institutional Decisions

- Define the “problem” or refine the “question”
- Identify and collect appropriate data
- Set benchmarks and targets/timelines
- Decide how to identify at-risk students early (before enrollment and soon after enrollment)
- Develop intervention strategies
- Evaluate and follow up

Conclusions (1)

- Select comparable institutions or units
- Understand the calculations
- Treat variations as “dashboard indicators”
- Understand underlying differences among subpopulations
- Find comparative data

Conclusions (2)

- Institutional level retention data are of limited value for policy making
- Start with sound definitions and appropriate data collection tools
- Simplify retention data—or attrition data—to manageable and understandable forms
- Expect modest gains in retention from changes in institutional policies and practices