

Re-examining Retention as a Measure of Institutional Quality

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Randy Swing, Co-Director,
Policy Center on the First Year of College & Fellow, The National Resource
Center on The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, USC.

Bobby Sharp, Director of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment
Appalachian State University

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

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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

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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?

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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

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Key Terms

- Drop Out
- Stop Out
- Transfer Out

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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

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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)

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Cost of Attrition

Savings Calculated Over Time

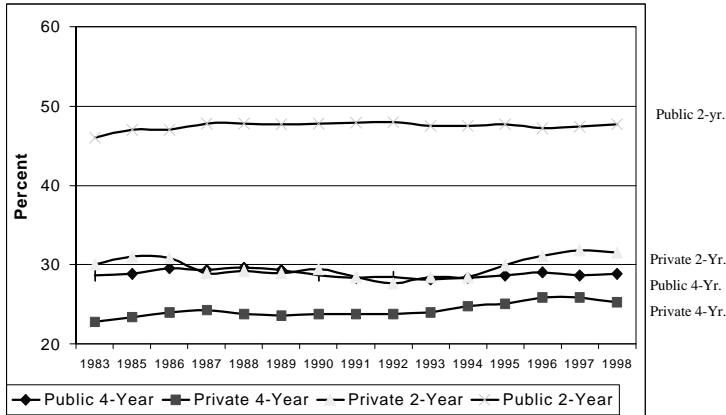
Examples:

Noel Levitz Worksheet

Appalachian State University Example

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



Source: ACT

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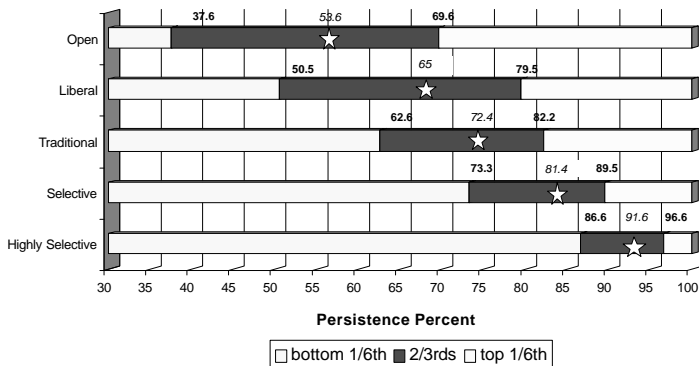
National Persistence Rates, 2001 1st to 2nd Year

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

data: ACT 2001

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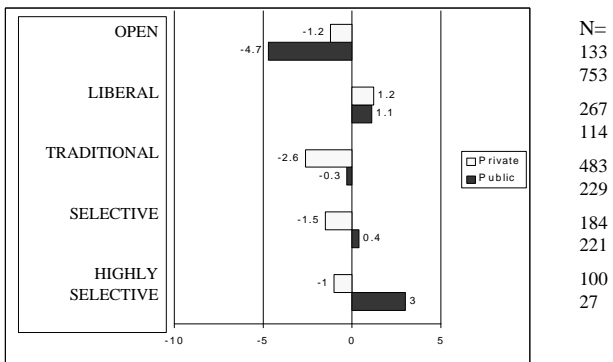
Beyond the “Mean” Retention Rates by Institutional Type



data source: ACT 2001

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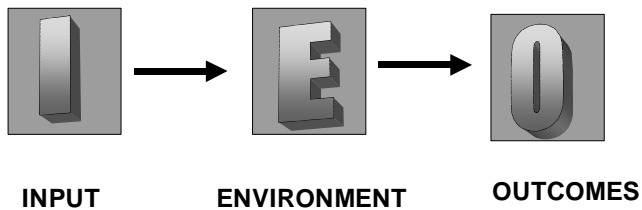
Percent Change in Mean Persistence Rates 1991 to 2001



Source: Postsecondary Education Opportunity Newsletter, October 2001

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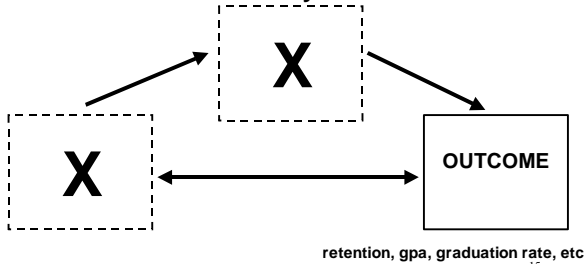
I – E – O Model



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

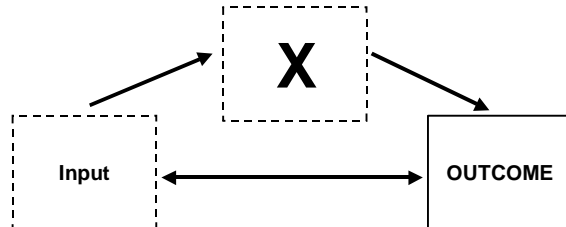
Outcomes Only Assessment



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

Input - Outcome Assessment



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Research on Input Measures:

Academic Background or “Academic Resources”

HS Grades/Rank

SAT/ACT

HS Curriculum Intensity (e.g. higher math, foreign language, AP courses)

Demographics

Gender

Race

Socioeconomic status/family background

Goals and Intentions

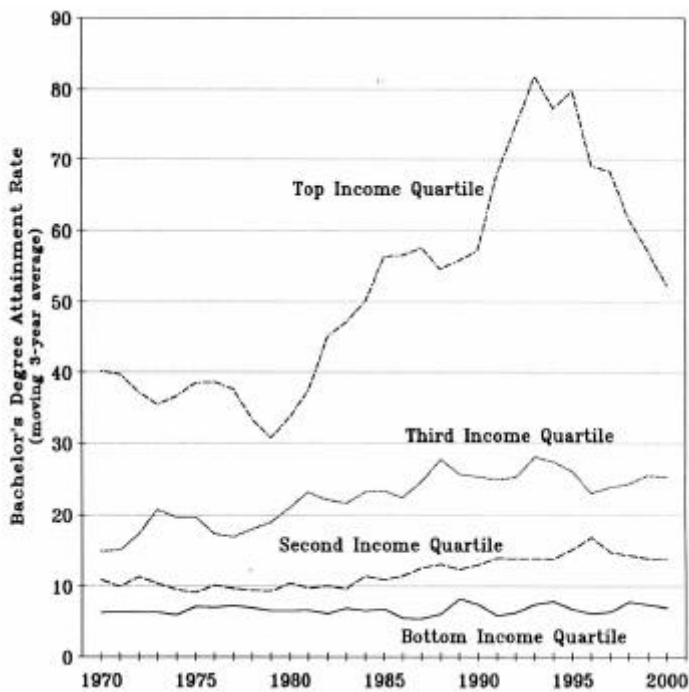
Personal Goals

Academic Goals (e.g., degree aspirations)

Motivation(academic, social)

“Receptivity to Support Services” (Noel-Levitz)

**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 Environmental Measures

Institutional Experiences

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

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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.

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Resources:

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

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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

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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)

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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

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Conclusions (1)

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

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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

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