

# **Perceptions And Academic Decision Making**

John W Tiner

Nebraska Economics and Business Association

### Abstract

Student retention is again a focus of Colleges and Universities. Several models for student retention have been identified as the result of research (Fike & Fike, 2008). One of the primary focuses of retention policies has been to ensure policies meet potentially changing student needs resulting from increased diversity among incoming students (Coll & Draves, 2009). In addition to discovering what students like about the college environment, there is a need to determine what influences may affect the academic decision-making process, particularly choice of a major. This study fulfilled this purpose with a Q-set of 36 statements designed across six dimensions. All 18 participants who sorted were students in at least their third full-time year of college. Results revealed three distinct groups of students interpreted as *Aspiration Oriented*, *Interest Oriented*, and *Outside Oriented*. The *Aspiration Oriented* students are influenced by what they can accomplish with their degree when they graduate. The *Interest Oriented* students are influenced by their interest in the subject of their major and the environment of the college itself. The *Outside Oriented* students are influenced by a desire for personal meaning and influences outside of the college environment, including both a personal desire for self-expression and creativity as well as familial and financial influences. The three views have implications for ways to understand the perceptions of individual students equipping academic advisors to better assist student retention.

## **Problem Statement**

When working with a student to help the student make academic decisions, it is important to know the factors influencing the student's decisions (Pizzolato, 2006). Attribution theory, expectancy-value theory, and goal theory all promote the role of self-efficacy as a primary factor in motivating a student to achieve his or her choice of a college degree. Morlon (2006), discovered a mentoring person can be an effective help to a student who lacks self-efficacy. Therefore, a mentor can bridge the gap between student and the student's goal when the student lacks a sense of self-efficacy. It is popular to believe the mentor's role is to help the student feel he or she has a relationship with the college. While this certainly can help a student to feel attached to the institution, it is also true the student has a variety of influences external to the college environment. Family, work, and financial concerns can also have an impact on the student's college experience as well as academic decision making process. It is important for a mentor or other advisor to understand the decision making process of the student in order to be better able to assist the student to continue with pursuing a college degree.

The central question emerges, "what does the student perceive to be the influences on the personal academic decision process"? It is important to for the mentor to understand perceptions from the viewpoint of the student. While feeling attached to the college can help with student loyalty to the college, it does not address factors such as the student's other loyalties to family or work. Additionally, it does not address financial concerns or the student's personal world view. Coll & Draves (2009) let us know modes advising models do not incorporate the student's level of development or the student's world view. The motivating reason to attend college can also differ from student to student. Students may choose a college primarily because of availability or convenience. However, it is beneficial for those promoting student retention to understand what the student wants and what the student perceives to be influencing academic decision making. Understanding how the student perceives decision making influences can help to enable academic institutions to be better prepared to meet student needs and to best supply the student with resources in order to improve college retention.

## **Purpose and Objective**

The purpose of this study is to examine what the student perceives to be the elements influencing personal academic decision making.

The objective of this study is to focus specifically on what the student perceives to be influencing or not influencing his or her choice of college major. By doing this, the study hopes to better understand the diversity of influences related to academic decision making. Therefore, by better understanding what the student's perception as well as what the student wants to achieve in college the academic advisor acting as a mentor is better equipped to understand and assist the student in the academic decision making process with the goal of student retention.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used for this study consisted of the Four Dimensions of Decision Making (McConnell, Brue, & Flynn, 2008) in combination with Viktor Frankle's Logotherapy Model.

The first of the Four Dimensions of Decision Making consists of the cost versus the perceived value of what the decision will bring. In this case, cost is not merely referring to money but also to opportunity cost, time, effort, energy, stress, and other related non-monetary costs. The individual must perceive the cost to be at least equal to the value he or she will receive. The second dimension is budget constraints. While a person may believe the value is well worth the cost, he or she may lack the resources in order to pay the cost. For example, a student may well believe a college degree in a certain major is well worth the price; but, because of family obligations, be unable to attend classes. While the student believes the time, effort, energy, and financial costs are well worth paying for the value received, if he or she has a familial obligation such as taking care of a sick relative then he or she may not have the time to invest in a college degree. The third dimension is rational self-interest. A mentally healthy individual will make decisions based on what he or she believes to be personally beneficial. Understood in this concept is the idea the individual will learn from past mistakes as well as act to benefit others because he or she gains benefit in the form of personal pleasure from helping other people (Sexton, 2005). The fourth dimension of decision making recognizes the role of the uniqueness of the individual in the form of personal preferences. Because people are different from one another and have distinctive, histories, perspectives, and wants, the individual will make decisions from his or her unique nature.

The concept a person strives to find meaning and purpose to their actions is outlined in Viktor Frankle's Logotherapy model of human psychological dynamics. As such, an individual will perform an act or do a deed because he or she believes the act has meaning or helps to supply meaning to his or her life (Frankl, 1984). This meaning can be related to an accomplishment the individual wants to make or can be related to a person's relationships to other people. Additionally, circumstances and external influences clearly have an effect on individual decision making and can manifest themselves by impacting the four dimensions of decision making.

## **Literature Review**

Retention of the student is a primary focus of colleges. An area important for student retention is for the student to be satisfied with the academic decisions the student has made.

The four dimensions of decision-making are price, budget constraints, personal preferences, and rational self-interest (McConnell et al., 2008). Price refers to the expense in obtaining something desired. Although the student may be able to afford the price of an education, the student must believe the price is not too high for the value received. Additionally, price is not as related to money as much as it is to opportunity costs, including time and effort. Budget constraints relate to the ability of the student to pay for the education in terms of opportunity cost, time, effort, and energy. Personal preferences refer to the student's unique wants out of life, and the environment the student wants to create for his or her self. This also includes the

student's own personal interests and goals as a result of the student's unique personality, likes, and dislikes. When a student chooses a college and a major to study at the college, the student will take into account his or her own rational self-interest. It is important to keep in mind self-interest is not the same as greed or selfishness (Sexton, 2005). Because doing good deeds and having meaning and purpose in life help mentally healthy people feel good, rational self-interest includes finding meaning and purpose in life. Additionally, basic psychological need fulfillment is an element of the student's rational self-interest. These basic psychological needs are relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

The dimensions of decision-making are elemental in choosing the college and major. The next element in the retention of the student is motivation of the student to continue pursuing his or her goal.

Self-determination theory of motivation accepts both the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions influencing a student's decision making. Included as part of the intrinsic motivators are the basic psychological needs. However, extrinsic sources of motivation are also instrumental. While a student's own sense of competence is rudimentary in task completion, a lack of a sense of self-efficacy can be subsidized by a person serving as a mentor such as an academic advisor.

### **The Factors Influencing Student Academic Decision Making**

The factors influencing decision-making are both internal as well as external. Internal factors include personal preferences, a sense of self-efficacy, and personal value of the goal. Personal value of the goal can range from fulfilling psychological needs, material needs, social needs, as well as the individual self-actualizing by finding purpose and meaning in the goal.

Factors influencing decision-making can include external considerations such as the price and budget constraints on goal attainment. Family and friends, media, circumstantial considerations, and the influence of mentors and those in authority can also impact a person's choice of a goal to pursue.

#### *Psychological needs*

Psychological need fulfillment can come from numerous different parts of the student's life. While attending college may not be the primary source of meeting psychological needs, it cannot frustrate these needs. According to Deci & Ryan (2000), students will position themselves so either psychological needs are met or substitutes satisfying psychological needs can be found. Whether or not students "need" a major is open to debate and students may be able to achieve academic success without declaring a major (Casement, 1998). However, Luke and Diambra (2011) blamed the "sophomore slump" on a lack of a choice of a major. Therefore, students having a "clear direction" with their academic goals suggests some type of goal or motivating factor is important even if a student has not chosen a major.

#### *Social and cultural factors*

Social and cultural factors are influential when it comes to directing a student to choose a major or stay in school. For example, views on social class structure and location within social class structure can have profound influences on a student's decision to remain in college.

Parents who have completed a college degree and have a professional job will influence students to continue strive for academic success (Fike & Fike, 2008). The influence of parents informs the concept of social role expectations as well as achieving cultural status having a strong impact on a student choosing a major as well as completing college (Butt, MacKenzie, & Manning, 2010). This research is supported by Workman (2015) who found parental influence affected a student's choice of major, choice of career, and even which college the student chooses to attend. The influence of parents is significant, but is not the only influence, the availability of family resources are also an important factor (Kuz'mina, 2014). Therefore, the family has a significant influence in a social capacity but a family's financial resources are also an influencing factor. Not only does family have an influence, but a students' friend who are not in the same academic setting can also influence a student in choosing a major and successfully completing an academic program (Faulkner, Baggett, Bowen, & Bowen, 2009).

A great deal of literature examines the student's own psychological and personal ability to complete a degree. However, the way the student feels about the academic community also has an influence (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The need for a sense of connection to the academic community is also supported by Schaub (2012) showing students need to feel a relationship to the campus as well as to other external partners supporting the student academically. Therefore, connection to the academic community may also have a social context in the broader community. When discounting for academic reputation, the distance a student lives from a college influences a student's choice of a college with the student choosing to attend a college close to home (Briggs, 2006). This would impact the choice of major for a student who is attending a college because of the limited courses and degree programs offered by a college at a given location.

The choice of a major is also related to social influences external to the student, family friends, or even the local environment. For example, Hoag, Grant, and Carpenter (2017), discovered exposure to news and media influenced students to choose journalism as a degree; and, with an increase in digital media and social media, newly developing sources of influence on student choices should be examined.

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative to understand the internal and external dimensions influencing a student in order to attract and keep the student enrolled in college. For those in academia striving to increase student retention, it is important to understand student perception of influences affecting a student's academic decision making are broad and varied. Most of the literature involving studies of student influences focused on elements from a marketing point of view such as pursuing questions about reputation, affordability, convenience, etc. However, there is a dearth of studies examining student influences from the realm of a student's perceptions of the influences involving academic decisions. This is one of the reasons this study will examine influences from the individual student perspective. There is no recognition of a monolithic single influence to be addressed for student retention because the individual student is unique. Therefore a diversity of primary influences exist when it comes to the academic decision making process. It is necessary to understand student expectations from the perspective of the student. It

is also important to understand student perceptions of influences on academic decision making from the perspective of the individual student.

It is also vital to understand a reciprocal relationship between the student and the college must occur. If the student's basic psychological needs are not being met then the student will probably not continue pursuing a college degree. Additionally, the desire for academic success was not the primary factor influencing student retention. The primary factor influencing student retention was a sense of relatedness to the college community.

When there is a deficit in the student having his or her own support group to provide a foundation for basic psychological needs to be met, then the academic advisor can emerge as a resource for not only information about the college and college resource availability but also as a provider of assistance in aiding the student to help get his or her basic psychological needs met. An effective academic advisor also appears to help mitigate a student's own lack of a sense of ability to be academically successful.

Although there has been a great deal of research into student influences from the college's point of view for marketing purposes, there has been little research in understanding the student's perspective of his or her academic decision making influences. Because of the importance of relatedness for student retention, it is helpful to understand influences from the perspective of the student in order to better meet student wants in the academic environment. For these reasons, the present study examines student influences from the perception of the student.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The 18 participants were a convenience sample of psychology students at a Midwestern University in the United State. Student ages ranged from 20 to 27 years old. All participants identified themselves as being white except for one student who identified his self as being Asian American. There were twelve females and six males. Seven students reported having attended college full time for three years. Eleven students reported having four or more years of college.

It is appropriate to look at students who had completed at least three years of college to better understand what influenced students to stay beyond the first two years of college.

### **Materials**

Instrumentation included a Q-Set of 36 statements and a board to be used in the sorting process. Board arrangement included columns from 1 through 9. The values assigned ranged from -4 to 4. There were two spaces in the first and ninth column and four spaces in the second, third, seventh, and eight columns. The fourth and sixth columns had five spaces and the fifth column had six spaces. After sorting the statements students wrote the number of each statement on a record sheet. On the back of the record sheet was a demographic survey.

### **Data Analysis**

The results of the 18 sorts was obtained by using the computer program PQMethod 2.11. A varimax rotation was used resulting in a three factor solution. The first factor had 5 defining sorts, the second factor had 6 defining sorts, and the third factor had 4 defining sorts. Three sorts were confounded. Factor score correlations were 1 and 2:  $r = .31$ ; 1 and 3  $r = .24$ ; and 2 and 3:  $r = .31$ . Explained variance was 22% for factor 1, 20% for factor 2, and 11% for factor 3.

### **Interpretation**

The first factor was named Aspiration Oriented. The sorts from these students demonstrated a future focus on accomplishments the students hoped to achieve in the future as a result of having a college degree in their chosen major. Distinguishing statements among the top choices for Aspiration Oriented Students with significance  $< .01$  were:

A career in this field will help me to become wealthy. This statement had an array position of 4 and a z-score of 1.58.

I can be a high achiever in this field. This statement had an array position of 2 and a z-score of 1.15.

Distinguishing statements among the bottom choices for Aspiration Oriented Students with significance  $< .01$  were:

I like taking the same classes my friends take. This statement had an array position of -4 and a z-score of -1.94.

Creativity is essential to me. This statement had an array position of -4 and a z-score of -1.50.

The second factor was named Interest Oriented. The students in this group demonstrated an interest in the academic environment including an affinity for their chosen major as well as their instructors.

Distinguishing statements among the top choices for Interest Oriented Students having significance  $< .01$  were:

I have chosen a very interesting field. This statement had an array position of 3 and a z-score of 1.48.

I like the instructors for this major. This statement had an array position of 2 and a z-score of .87.

Distinguishing statements among the bottom choices for Interest Oriented Students having a significance  $< .01$  were:

A career in this field will allow me to be influential over other people. This statement had an array position of -4 and a z-score of -1.85.

Fulfilling my family obligations is very important to me. This statement had an array position of -4 and a z-score of -1.71



The third factor was named Outwardly Oriented. The results for this group were not future focused like the Aspiration Oriented group nor were their influenced focused on enjoyment of the subject matter and people at the college. Instead this group focused on friend, family, affordability, self-expression, and creativity.

Distinguishing statements among the top choices for Outwardly Oriented Students having significance  $<.01$  were:

Creativity is essential to me. This statement had an array position of 3 and a z-score of 1.38.

Affordability is a fundamental requirement in my opinion. This statement had an array position of 2 and a z-score of 1.05.

Distinguishing statements among the bottom choices of the Outwardly Oriented Students having significance  $<.01$  were:

I like the instructors for this major. This statement had an array position of -4 and a z-score of -1.99.

I can be a high achiever in this field. This statement had an array position of -3 and a z-score of -1.59

### **Significance Of The Present Study**

This study demonstrates three specific perceptions on the part of students about the influences over their academic decision process. The Aspiration Oriented Students were focused on what they want to accomplish after completing their degree. The nature of their statements suggests they have a high sense of self-efficacy and autonomy. The Interest Oriented Students perceived themselves to be influenced by present day matters including interest and enjoyment of the field of study as well as liking their instructors. This group demonstrated a positive sense of relatedness toward the college.

The Outside Oriented group, while influenced by circumstances and external factors, did seem to have the basic psychological need of relatedness as well as a sense of social support. However, the sense of relatedness and social support came from outside of the college environment. Perceived social support has been positively linked to college GPA (Burt, Young, & Tiner, 2010). However, students in this group could leave the college if environmental factors were to change so as to cause them to lose social support, this group might be in danger of dropping out of college.

### **Summary**

Student perceptions of influences over academic decision such as choice of major vary from student to student. This is in part based on the focus of the student. A student may be focused on a goal beyond college where the college learning experience is a step to get to where he or she wants to be in the future. A second student may perceive he or she makes decisions based on his

or her enjoyment of the college experience itself in the present day. A third student may feel influenced by elements such as affordability, family, and friends.

Colleges are focused on student retention. Should an Aspiration Oriented Student decide he or she is no-longer interest in particular goal outside of college then the student may lose his or her personal drive to complete a degree program. An Interest Oriented Student may decide to leave the college environment if he or she loses interest in the subject matter or has an experience resulting in a loss of enjoyment of the college environment. The Outside Oriented Student may find academic success in the college environment being adversely affected by elements not directly related to the college itself.

In all of these cases, it would benefit someone serving as a mentor to a student to understand the student's influences from the perspective of the student.

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