

*Institutional Level Catalysts and Constraints*

**THE STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES  
RELATED TO STUDENT PERSISTENCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Using literature and illustrations drawn from a pilot study, this article explores the theoretical and methodological challenges entailed in the study of student retention. We center the discussion around two important efforts to expand the theoretical base and scope for research in this area: Berger's (2000) concept of colleges and universities as optimizers of cultural capital and Bensimon's (2007) recent critique of the narrowness of the frames that predominate student retention research. By way of exploring these issues through a concrete example, the article presents an overview of processes and findings from a funded pilot study of institutional policies and practices surrounding student retention. This exploration—part essay, part research report—leads us ultimately to pose two central questions on which, we suggest, future research should build: *What are institutions doing to improve student retention?* and *How do institutions intervene in the workings of cultural capital in higher education?*

Institutional policy makers and researchers have been focused on the topic of student persistence for more than 2 decades. During this time, a large body of research has amassed on the impact of student characteristics and how their interactions with institutions influence persistence (Anderson, 1986; Astin, 1975;

Thomas, 1981; Tinto, 1993). Surprisingly little attention from institutions and researchers, however, has been directed toward examining the institutional role in student persistence. Perhaps due to lack of interest or to difficulties inherent in studying this facet of the phenomenon, to date we have little research to draw on for our understandings of how institutional policies and practices influence student persistence. Using literature and illustrations drawn from a pilot study, this article explores the theoretical and methodological challenges entailed in the study of student retention. We center the discussion around two important efforts to expand the theoretical base and scope for research in this area: Berger's (2000) concept of colleges and universities as optimizers of cultural capital and Bensimon's (2007) recent critique of the narrowness of the frames that predominate student retention research.

What these two important contributions share in common, and what is of particular interest for this article, is their focus on the role of the institution and of institutional practice in student persistence. We discuss the results of our pilot study in light of these frameworks because together they synthesize critiques of the theoretical underpinning driving a great majority of persistence studies over decades. Moreover, they propose tools for improving research in this area so that it can address what is important in student success. For example, both Berger (2000) and Bensimon (2007) work to broaden the emphasis in the discourse on student success from a predominant focus on student characteristics toward an approach that accounts for the role of institutional practices. The conceptual footing and practical direction provided in these pieces addresses important limitations that researchers struggle with in this line of inquiry. These limitations not only hamper the development of theory about student success, they also make the research less useful for institutions trying to improve practice in this area. An extended debate has noted, for example, that studies based on Tinto's influential model do a poor job of explaining the academic success of students of color (Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992). Finally, both frameworks enable us to consider not only how institutional policies affect student persistence but also what institutions do in practice to improve their efforts in this area. Without this kind of reconsideration and forward movement, the result is—as Bensimon has pointed out—research that is “flawed as well as incomplete” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 445).

Relying on research and theory, we set the context for this exploration in the first section below, which reviews Berger's and Bensimon's ideas in further detail. Subsequently, we turn to a discussion of our processes and findings in the College Board Pilot Study on Student Retention. The example of the pilot study, now in its second year, illuminates both our initial efforts to examine the role of institutions and the inherent challenges of studying this topic. In the process, it illustrates important questions and dynamics raised by both Berger and Bensimon. The article concludes with an outline of central questions researchers will need to address in pushing this research on this topic further.

What can we know about the role of institutional policies and practices in student persistence in college? For several reasons, this question is central to institutions, and to researchers of student success. First, because the phenomenon of student persistence results from an interaction between student and institution, understanding more about what institutions do to support student persistence is important for one of the foremost educational goals currently being posed for the country: students' success in college. The prominence of this issue has been illustrated most visibly in the Spelling Commission Report (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Moreover, recent work commissioned by the National Post-secondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) further reinforces the need to understand the institutional role in student persistence (Perna & Thomas, 2006; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Indeed, for these reasons, Tinto (2006-2007) calls for more research on how individual campuses influence student success across a variety of institutional settings.

Second, institutions are concerned about retention because of accountability demands as well as enrollment management concerns. Several proposals from federal policy makers have called for the use of college graduation rates as an indicator of educational quality (Adelman, 1999; American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002; Gold & Albert, 2006). Moreover, this issue is significant in the broader debate on the effectiveness of educational institutions. Without more research on institutional practices surrounding retention, the accountability demands will remain empty—focusing either on “inputs” alone or on propositional common-sense solutions whose effects are uncertain. The recent Pell Institute report “Demography is not Destiny” (Engle & O’Brien, 2007) introduces a promising strategy for separating institutional practices from the predominant emphasis on selectivity and student characteristics. Derived from Astin and colleagues’ predictive model (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987), this report highlights results from 14 institutions and evaluates them in comparison to predicted retention rates. The report then looks at how institutional policies and practices vary across “high-performing” and “low-performing” campuses, and it concludes with a set of promising practices.

### **SETTING THE CONTEXT USING THE LITERATURE AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Researchers and institutions that study college student retention work to understand how to link policies and structures to the theoretical modeling of student departure. Recently, a line of thinking led by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), Braxton and McClendon (2001-2002), Hossler (2005), and Stage and Hossler (2000) has focused on the role of student behaviors and institutional practices, which bear on college student retention. These institutional practices—which some have termed “policy levers” (Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991)—include the eight listed below:

- a. recruitment practices that support the fulfillment of students' academic and social expectations of college;
- b. structures and practices that have been shown to reduce racial discrimination and prejudice on campus;
- c. the fair implementation of administrative and academic regulations;
- d. the guidance of students, through academic advising, toward satisfactory course experiences;
- e. the support and development of active and collaborative learning strategies in the classroom;
- f. workshop training in stress management and career planning;
- g. orientation and residential life practices that support frequent and significant student interactions with peers; and
- h. the provision of need-based financial aid (Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002).

Identified through both theory and research, some of these levers have a well-developed empirical record supporting them; others among them need to be explored further in research before we will understand how they relate empirically to student retention. For example, the fulfillment of students' academic and social expectations of college has been linked positively to social integration at institutions (Braxton, Hossler, & Vesper, 1995; Helland, Stallings, & Braxton, 2001-2002). The role of advising, however, has seen relatively little empirical exploration (Hossler, 2005). Still others of these areas—the role of career-advising practices, for example—are the subject of some debate (Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006; Peterson, 1993).

Thus, despite extensive practical and theoretical work on the organizational issues that relate to persistence, for several reasons a solid grounding in research to support these propositions empirically has not yet developed. First, it is reasonable to assert (Berger, 2000)—and we begin to have some evidence to back this up (Ziskin, Hossler, & Gross, 2006)—that the particulars of an institution's role in student retention vary by context, making it slow going to test theoretical propositions that work across institutions. Variations in how student persistence and student success are even framed at 2- and 4-year institutions or across residential and nonresidential campuses further complicate the study of institutional policies and practices across colleges and universities. Bensimon (2007), citing Keller (1998) to illustrate the long-standing concern that quantitative studies of persistence do not adequately capture the conditioned and contextualized experiences of students, extends the critique to the predominance of correlational studies still characterizing the research on this topic (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Recent studies by the Pell Institute (Engle & O'Brien, 2007; Muraskin & Lee, 2004) examine institutional practices tied to persistence through five components posed as important to student success: academic skills, financial support, academic direction, instruction, and campus participation (Muraskin & Lee, 2004, p. 17).

The structure of policies and practices at institutions further complicates investigations. Many institutional policies and practices are applied to all or nearly all students in a given cohort, thus constraining variability in student experience measures (e.g., orientation, advising) and rendering elusive the measurement of their effects. One solution for this would be to establish empirically based groupings of institutions that provide for more variation on these measures. This kind of work is only now beginning. The opposite problem, however, often emerges on larger campuses where the groups of students targeted and the interventions provided can be different across schools within the same institution—for example, across the colleges of engineering, education, and fine arts.

Another barrier to research on the institutional role in student persistence is the underdevelopment of theory related to nonresidential institutions. To date most of the research on student persistence uses cohort-based approaches that assume most students first enter college the fall semester after graduating from high school and then over a 4- to 6-year time period move in a linear fashion through the postsecondary educational system at the same institution. Because of the prevalence of this assumption, we know very little about the factors that affect student persistence for part-time students, transfer students, and older working students. Indeed, much of the work on student persistence can be appropriately subjected to the recent criticism of NCES definitions of students by Adelman (2007), who noted that these definitions exclude more than 50% of all students enrolled in postsecondary education—among whom are part-time students, transfer students, and students enrolled in for-profit institutions. These limitations also mean that we know very little about institutional policies and practices in the types of institutions where these “missing” students enroll, further constraining our range of conceptual leads for understanding the role of institutional cultural capital in student persistence. Both Bean and Metzner (1985) and Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) provide important advancements in theorizing student departure at commuter institutions. However, the field as a whole has not taken these threads up with the extensive research needed to ground our understanding in empirical work. Without more empirical work to further develop theory on student persistence in nonresidential institutions, it is difficult for the research to make sense of how institutional contexts vary—not just in an aggregate sense but in a more textured and detailed way. Having a better sense of how the institutional contexts for student persistence vary, in turn, would enable us to explore how institutions make a difference in student persistence.

### **Students, Institutions, and Cultural Capital**

Still more reasons intersect with recurring gaps in the research on student persistence in general. A case in point is the enduring question about the role of cultural capital in retention. Much work in this area acknowledges the role of cultural capital in the persistence of college students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005;

Titus, 2006; Walpole, 2003). Nevertheless, this construct has seldom been used to examine how institutions are organized to influence student success. Yet, the concept of cultural capital occupies a central place in the two major lines of research in this area. One way to describe the “nexus studies” of St. John and colleagues, for example, is as a long-term effort to introduce the role of cultural capital into research developing Tinto’s influential theory of student retention (St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). In other research on financial aid and persistence as well, the role of cultural capital becomes somewhat of a theme in what eludes us in unobservable traits in our efforts to model this relationship (e.g., Hossler, Ziskin, Kim, Cekic, & Gross, 2007; Singell & Stater, 2006). While neither of these lines of inquiry specifically addresses it, the role of institutional cultural capital is inherent in their underlying questions.

Thus, the question of how cultural capital works in higher education pertains also to the role of the institution in student persistence. The institution of higher education has been assigned a societal role—complex and compromised though it may be—as an equalizer of opportunity and as a vehicle for social mobility. Because of that role, it is incumbent on the institution to mitigate at least partially the replicative workings of cultural capital on campus. Depending on the framework one applies, this may be the reason why we expect institutions to retain a nonprofit status, for example, or to attempt to provide an equitable climate.

We are referring here to how cultural capital works to reproduce inequalities in society, and how institutions are expected—because of implicit and explicit social mandates—to serve as a public good for society. Without (and often even with) the competent mitigation of the institutions and practitioners within the institution, the dynamics of cultural capital naturally work to the disadvantage of students holding cultural capital that is not highly valued on campus, resulting in disproportionately low retention rates for first-generation college students, adult learners, students of color, or low-income students, for example.

A brief example may help to clarify this point. An institution might, for instance, work to support the persistence of first-generation students so that they have the genuine opportunity to succeed in college. However, the stratified nature of our society makes the provision of that genuine opportunity somewhat less than straightforward. Instructors, practitioners, and other students who have a history of college-going in their families will take it largely for granted—and will communicate through explicit evaluation, implicit cues, and expectations—that certain types of knowledge, behavior, values, or tastes are the norm in academic contexts on campus. They likely will take this set of norms enough for granted that even if they intend to include and support first-generation students, they will not consistently see the extent to which those norms were constructed through a “conversation” to which neither the first-generation students nor their families have had access and that for this reason these norms may or may not coincide with the behaviors, preferences, and forms of knowledge valued by the first-generation students.

The divergence between the norms valued on campus and the norms of some students' experience is evident in the following example of an instructor who, to build solidarity with students, refers off-handedly to the dynamics surrounding money between middle-class parents and children.

When Mary was in college, her German professor, smiling, once asked the class, "What did Goethe's father send him when he was studying in Italy?" The answer was "No money" ("kein Geld").

The joke went over pretty well in the classroom of the private liberal arts college where this happened because most of the students were from middle-class or upper-middle-class families in which the storyline makes sense. Even if it didn't play out in a specific student's family, the idea was familiar: irresponsible adolescent—enjoying new freedoms—tries to wheedle money from beleaguered parents, who try to hold out until the adolescent turns it around and begins to act responsibly. The references to studying abroad further reinforced this identification. There were some students, however, for whom the joke didn't make the same kind of sense. We all understood the language—we'd all progressed that far in German—but the middle-class instructor and the middle-class students shared a certain kind of cultural capital that had (bizarrely perhaps) transformed seemingly negative traits (youthful irresponsibility, parental indulgence) into a positive source of solidarity. More important, getting the joke was the class activity at that moment and signals showing that students understood the underlying meaning with its reference to middle-class family dynamics were subtly rewarded by both the teacher and other classmates.

The divergence in norms may in other instances produce conflict. For example, a professor may focus a section of an introductory sociology course on research founded on cultural-deprivation models, which describe the structural and cultural aspects of low-income female-headed single-parent households in strongly pathological terms. Some students in the class may have in fact been raised by single mothers in low-income homes. Being tested on material that describes families like one's own as pathological is likely a negative experience—possibly undermining, certainly alienating.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, a similar dynamic might arise in peer interactions on campus—though we would expect different aspects of culture

<sup>1</sup> Bensimon makes this point in explaining the central role of practitioners in the academic success of students of color:

[Practitioners] may not realize that minority students sometimes may avoid desirable practices of academic engagement because of embarrassment, fear of being judged incompetent, or concern about reinforcing negative stereotypes (Bensimon, 2007, pp. 453-454; Cox, 2004; Peña, Bensimon, & Colyar, 2006).

In a similar vein, Berger cites Hurtado and colleagues (1998) explanation of "embedded benefits" that may be accorded to White students on many campuses across the country.

to surface in those social sites. As a result of incidents like these, the first-generation student may feel undervalued, may experience a lack of belonging on campus, or may feel that the institutional context is inconsistent with her or his values. She or he may avoid academic and social activities, may develop a negative identification with the institution, and may miss the possibility of earning a degree there.

Seen from a perspective concerned with cultural capital, we might explain the same situation as follows: The cultural capital valued in one or multiple fields within the institution may not be congruent with the cultural capital held or valued by first-generation students. To the extent that an incongruity exists, the climate on campus may impede these students' engagement in activities that are important for student success. Such are the workings of cultural capital in this kind of setting. Thus, if it is an institution's role and aim to support equity and the persistence of first-generation students on campus, institutional practices must be in place to mitigate the workings of cultural capital we just described.

However, the public-good aspect of institutions' social charters comprises only one kind of pressure driving the actions of higher education institutions. As Berger (2000) points out, these institutions simultaneously work in an economy that drives them to optimize their cultural capital as educational organizations as well. Kamens (1978) wrote about the status-related aspect of this phenomenon—showing how it benefits institutions to increase their status. Other scholars have explored this point more recently (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). Beyond this, we can see too how student retention has become a central focus of institutions' efforts to optimize the cultural capital they hold. Clearly, student retention has economic ramifications for institutions, since it is widely held that it is more efficient and more consistent with an institution's goals to retain and graduate students than it is to maintain enrollment levels by recruiting new students (Bean & Hossler, 1990). In addition, recent calls for accountability and measures of institutional effectiveness have begun to include student retention rates as measures of institutional effectiveness (Adelman, 1999; American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002; Gold & Albert, 2006). Thus, current pressures reinforce each other in making student retention rates a matter of particular interest for institutions.

Because the question of cultural capital is central to student persistence and to institutions' roles in general, Berger's (2000) conceptual framework—which posits that both students and institutions work to optimize their cultural capital—has implications by extension for *research* on institutions' role in student persistence. Frameworks that view students' decisions as rationally bounded to optimize their own capital while presuming (or undertheorizing) institutional actions as rational, legitimate, or as simply motivated for the good of students render invisible an important aspect of what conditions the actions and roles of institutions.

It is better to see the simultaneous pulls on students and institutions alike. To do this in research on institutional factors in persistence entails looking at various types of institutions with varying kinds of cultural capital. In addition, it is important for researchers to be able to take into account the multiple combinations of factors that may inform students' experiences—the institution's policies, contexts, and practices, and the contradictions among them that Berger's framework helps us see. It is therefore a useful first step simply to examine what institutions do to support student persistence.

### **The Role of Racial Climate on Campus**

The role of campus racial climate in the retention of students of color presents a similarly relevant complexity that theory and research surrounding persistence struggle to explain. Bensimon (2007) points out that the retention literature has not accounted well for the role of racial climate on campus. We know intuitively and from numerous other lines of inquiry (Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, Macias, & Dee, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1998) that campus racial climate makes a difference for students of color, their college experience, and ultimately to degree attainment. As Bensimon (2007) has suggested in her ASHE Presidential Address, research on student success is ill equipped to explain the success of students of color for several reasons. First, because of the predominance of quantitative studies (Perna & Thomas, 2006), this line of inquiry struggles with inherent limitations for understanding contextualized experience (Bensimon, 2007, p. 448). Similarly, the experiences of students of color are sometimes occluded within greater numbers of White students enrolled in the institutions studied. Finally, Bensimon's central point is that the student success literature builds too narrowly on theories that link student departure to the characteristics and behaviors of students. The role of institutions and of institutional practitioner—shown in recent work (Dowd et al., 2006) to be pivotal actors in the success of high-achieving students of color—is therefore obscured from view. Bensimon employs the concept of “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 2000) to highlight the collected practice (expectations, behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes) that faculty and other institutional practitioners bring to their interactions with students. It is through developing funds of knowledge about “the conditions that structure the collegiate experience of minority students” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 446), first-generation students, older working students, or low-income students that practitioners may affect the success of students from those communities. This aspect of student experience on campus aligns with what Hurtado and colleagues have identified as the psychological dimension of campus racial climate (1998).

Bensimon's call to broaden the frameworks we bring to this research and Berger's idea to reanimate the institution in student persistence theory may together provide the link that allows us to see how educational institutions

simultaneously transform and replicate social inequalities through education. While the concept of cultural capital has limitations for explaining racial inequalities in the United States, the idea that institutions as well as students optimize cultural capital acknowledges the inherent potential of institutions to replicate social inequalities.

Likewise, Dowd and Bensimon's work highlighting the pivotal role of practitioners illuminates the interaction between student and institution—showing that in good ways and bad what institutions and practitioners do collaboratively to construct the environment and educational cues for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students makes a difference in student success. Bensimon argues that what practitioners do matters in student success; it follows that the work of researchers in this area entails exploring how institutions shape what practitioners do.

### **PICTURES AND PROCESSES: THE EXAMPLE OF THE COLLEGE BOARD PILOT STUDY ON STUDENT RETENTION**

The College Board Pilot Study on Student Retention is exploring the institutional practices surrounding persistence through the development of two new surveys piloted in 2006 and 2007—one focused on student experiences and behaviors, the other on institutional policies and practices. In the following section, we share some early results from the survey of institutional practices. In addition, particularly because this is a pilot effort, we explore the process itself as an example of what is entailed in studying the role of institutions in persistence.

We designed the survey using a configuration of constructs drawn from recent work on institutional policy levers (Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002) and also included items on faculty-student interaction, support for practitioners, campus climate, and institutional effort devoted to improving retention. Constructs in this last area incorporated basic information (such as the presence of a retention coordinator, a retention committee, and the percentage of FTE devoted to studying and improving retention at the institution) and subjective self-ratings by respondents (e.g., regarding the level of coordination of retention efforts on campus). We also drew together information on retention rates and other relevant institutional characteristics using a combination of self-reports on the survey and data merged from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). In the second year of the pilot study we are revising the institutional survey to be used primarily as a benchmarking tool to map and measure the terrain of institutional retention practices.

### **DATA AND ANALYSIS**

In the pilot study's first year, we surveyed public and private 4-year institutions in five states: California, Georgia, Indiana, New York, and Texas. The selection of these states centered on our efforts to include institutions from a

range of geographical and state policy contexts. In addition, in order to assemble a sampling frame with the greatest number of institutions possible, we selected states that are home to a high concentration of colleges and universities. The selection of California, Georgia, Indiana, New York, and Texas allowed us to access high numbers of institutions while also capturing variation in geographical location and state policy environments. The institutional survey was administered as a Web-based questionnaire to retention coordinators on 274 campuses across these five states. This questionnaire asked respondents to report on first-to-second-year retention rates and on participation rates, programs, and policies related to student persistence.

In exploring this topic we have had to contend with two important trade-offs that center on the limitations of research that relies on a survey method to explore this topic. In survey research, investigators are bounded by the direct knowledge and accessibility of respondents. In this study we asked a single respondent from each institution to gather information from multiple departments on campus in order to complete the survey. While this strategy—as opposed to one in which multiple respondents in the institution are asked to complete the survey—may help to ensure that responses are completed, it also limits the breadth and number of constructs that can be included. Many constructs listed among Braxton and colleagues' policy levers—recruitment practices, for example—would be better explored using multiple respondents, perhaps even better explored through direct observation. In addition, as in any survey, we had to limit the number of questions to minimize the considerable respondent burden of a survey like this. This resulted in natural trade-offs in our ability to fully explore some constructs in this first year of the study.

Second, we needed to consider how to create a link between the line of work proposing institutional policy levers on the one hand and traditional retention research on the other. Without some capacity to link the two, we would not be able to draw on previous work in specifying a model that could shed light on student persistence behavior at all—let alone extend what we now can conclude about the role of institutional practices in the phenomenon. Thus, it was necessary to engage with standard constructs common to research in this area, including faculty-student interaction measures and questions about social engagement of students, for example.

The response rate for this first year of the survey was 32.7%, resulting in 90 cases for analysis. The resulting sample was evenly divided between institutions of public (41) and private (48) control. When we looked at Carnegie classifications broadly, we found that master's granting institutions were the largest group (40%) among respondents, while research universities and baccalaureate institutions represented 28% and 26% respectively. (The remaining 6% included specialized schools of engineering, health professions, business, or the arts.) While IPEDS data show that 32.2% of institutions in the five states sampled required their first-year students to reside on campus, 40.5% of responding

institutions held that requirement. The mean fall-to-fall retention rate among responding institutions was 78.1% for 2005—slightly higher than the national average that year (74.4%). The median total revenue of responding institutions was \$70,643,587. Thus, while residential institutions were slightly overrepresented, the sample otherwise reflected the broader population of 4-year institutions on relevant variables. To control for the wealth, size, mission, and selectivity of institutions in our analysis, we combined survey responses with IPEDS data capturing relevant institutional characteristics.

In addition to descriptive statistics, we also used multiple regression to examine how institutional characteristics, conditions, and practices are associated with retention rates at participating institutions. Because of item-missing data, the regression was run on 76 cases with full responses. Because of the small scale of the study, we used a scaled-back regression model combining measures of institutional resources, context, and practices. Included in the model (see Equation 1 below) were:

- a. institutional characteristics ( $\beta_1$ ), including residential/commuter status and total revenues; and
- b. institutional structures and practices ( $\beta_2$ ), including advising policies, midterm grade reporting, funding for student affairs, total instructional expenditures, and the structure of institutional efforts surrounding retention. (See Table 1 for further information on the measurement of the variables included.)

#### EQUATION 1: PERSISTENCE MODEL

$$\text{Retention Rate} = \beta_0 + \beta_1x_i + \beta_2x_i + \varepsilon_i$$

We conducted several tests to identify possible deficiencies in the models. Checks for multicollinearity and autocorrelation revealed no strong correlations among the independent variables or residuals. Furthermore, examination of a casewise listing of residuals revealed no extreme outliers unduly influencing the fit (Chatterjee & Hadi, 2006).

### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### What are Institutions Doing?: Some Telling Descriptive Results

Before presenting the results from our multivariate analysis, we ask the reader to consider some of our descriptive findings, which in their own right present a disquieting view of institutional efforts to enhance student persistence. Although 59.1% of respondents reported having an administrator charged with tracking and improving retention and persistence, the mean portion of FTE that coordinators

Table 1. Measurement of Variables in Model

Variables	Measurement
Retention rate	Fall-to-fall retention rate for first-time first-year students in 2004-2005
Authority of retention coordinator	Factor comprised of standardized scores on three questions: (a) Authority to implement new initiatives; (b) Authority to fund new programs; (c) Percentage of an FTE for the "retention coordinator" role
Advising required	1 = required first-year students to meet with an academic advisor every term, 0 = otherwise
Midterm grade reporting	1 = collected midterm grade information for first-year students in 2004-2005, 0 = otherwise
Residentialness	Percentage of first-year undergraduate students who lived in campus residence halls in 2004-2005
Total revenue	Core revenue in total dollars per FTE DFR2004
Instructional expenditures	Instruction expenses per FTE DFR2004
Student affairs	Index combining respondents' ratings of (a) staffing and (b) funding for student affairs at home institution

could devote to student persistence was .29. On the topic of new initiatives at these institutions, 72.6% of the coordinators reported that they had some or a great deal of *authority to implement* new initiatives and only 43.1% of these reported having either some or a great deal of *authority to fund* new initiatives. This means that only 43% of all responding institutions had someone coordinating student retention efforts who could also implement new programs and only 26% of these could also fund new initiatives. These results are contrary to a strong organizational commitment to student persistence and success. Results from this pilot study reveal furthermore that faculty were the main providers of academic advising at 57% of responding institutions, although 70.0% of institutions reported only small or nonexistent *incentives* for full-time faculty to serve as academic advisors for first-year students. Other findings also reveal, at best, an ambiguous level of commitment to improving the probabilities of student persistence and graduation. The picture emerging from these initial

descriptive results suggests, therefore, that the focus on student persistence at many 4-year institutions may be quite weak.

### The Institution's Role in Student Persistence

Moving to our regression analyses, the results from the analysis are summarized in Table 2. The variance explained by the model was 68.4% ( $R$ -squared = .684).

Results of the regression highlight three findings of particular interest to our analysis. Not surprisingly, residentialness (the proportion of first-year students living on campus) was significantly associated with retention rates at participating campuses. More relevant to our questions, however, the level of funding allocated to instructional expenses and whether students were required to meet with advisors every term also showed significant effects on retention rates. Unexpectedly, perhaps, the discretionary authority allocated to retention coordinators showed no significant relationship with retention rates in this analysis.

While somewhat consistent with previous research, these results also point to an expansion in this area of inquiry. By showing that institutional focus of resources on instruction supports retention rates, for example, this study illuminates areas where institutions' actions make a difference. In addition, policies surrounding advising for first-year students were shown here to have a significant influence on retention rates. This represents an extension of previous research regarding advising and its relationship to persistence specifically (Patton et al., 2006).

Because this is a pilot study, we are still refining and expanding our analyses. Following the lead of the Pell Institute reports, for example, to more precisely contextualize the findings on institutional practices, we plan to use the formula developed by Astin, Korn, and Green (1987) for predicting graduation rates. Thus far we are encouraged by results that suggest that the influences of actionable

Table 2. Regression on Fall-to-Fall First-to-Second-Year Retention Rates ( $N = 76$ )

Variables	Beta	Sig.
Authority of retention coordinator (Factor)	-.046	
Advising required each term	.148	*
Midterm grade reporting	-.106	
Resources for student affairs (Index)	.052	
Residentialness	.472	***
Total revenue per FTE student 2004	-.006	
Instructional expenditures	.448	**

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

policies and practices can be documented and understood through further inquiry. Examinations of this kind are central to understanding the role of institutional practices in supporting student success. Moreover, by exploring how institutional practices may be linked to retention, this pilot study points to relevant, actionable constructs and relationships that can be adopted in further research at the institutional level.

Finally, the study also leads to implications for the further development of theory surrounding student retention. That the residential status of institutions emerges as a positive significant factor supports Berger's (2000) intuitive proposition that institutions with higher cultural capital have higher retention rates. Confirming this point, however, does little to guide institutional decisions about how to increase retention rates. On the other hand, the finding that instructional expenditures are associated with retention points to an actionable implication for institutional decisions for allocating resources. As we explore this research further, we hope to find evidence of additional actionable policy levers to enhance student persistence.

### **DISCUSSIONS POINTS AND NEW DIRECTIONS**

The preceding exploration—part essay, part research report—leads us to pose two central questions on which, we suggest, future research should build.

#### **QUESTION 1: What do institutions do to improve student retention?**

The first of these questions is a simple descriptive matter. Its centrality stems from the finding that most student retention research focuses on student characteristics (Bensimon, 2007; Berger, 2000; Perna & Thomas, 2006). Since there have been comparatively few studies focused on institutions in respect to this question, there is a need to examine current institutional practice. Because both students and institutions are involved in the interaction that results in student retention, it makes sense to ask “What are students doing?” However, the analogous question “What are institutions doing?” is equally necessary. This is a question that might have been posed and pursued in research long ago. Nevertheless, our collective propensity as educational researchers leads us to direct our gaze outward, locating the objects of our inquiry outside of ourselves and our own organizations. As we have discussed, renewed interest in institutional effectiveness in this arena has propelled us now toward more reflexive inquiry, focused on the current range of institutional practice. This pilot study is assembling a preliminary picture of institutional practice surrounding student retention, as described above. In the following section, we will revisit the emergent picture to place the findings in perspective with the theoretical frameworks suggested by Berger (2000) and Bensimon (2007). In addition, we will explore new directions—implications for research and practice suggested by the study.

*The Emergent Picture*

First, institutions are motivated for several reasons to increase their overall retention rates and use a range of strategies in that effort. Some may try to attract students with higher cultural capital, or may pass policies to give that impression. Other institutions engage in multiple program- and campus-level strategies drawing on a range of sources to craft these strategies: extracting advice from the propositional literature, studying the problem on their own campuses, looking for best practices, and (as resources allow) enlisting the help of consultants. Even so, increasing the retention rate is only one among several elements of institutional cultural capital to be optimized and balanced against the others. The material cost of optimizing institutional cultural capital naturally also enters the equation, limiting the resources that can be devoted to the goal of increasing retention. In this way, institutions balance increasing student retention against other competing goals, and so may not devote adequate resources to the task. A case in point can be found in our results showing that while 59% of institutions in the study have appointed a retention coordinator, the mean proportion of an FTE invested in that role (.29) is remarkably low.

Second, institutions identify and follow groups of students who are dropping out disproportionately, a practice evinced in the multiple collections of persistence data that the pilot study institutions reported conducting annually. A high proportion of institutions reported calculating annual retention rates of students, disaggregated by racial/ethnic group, class-year, and major, for example. While our survey does not tell us whether or how they were targeting groups of students with strategies to support the retention rates of those groups in particular, this finding is an indication that many institutions record and follow the retention rates of student groups.

Third, institutions have many initiatives and a low level of coordination. The institutions responding to our survey reported low levels of concrete institutional resources devoted to coordinated retention efforts. While the appointment of an administrator to oversee these efforts was fairly widespread, for example, the resources and authority allocated to these coordinators were in most cases quite limited. We submit that it is difficult to imagine institutions in this study expecting the amount of effort devoted to retention to operate other important campus functions, such as admissions, institutional finance, or academic administration. In encouraging faculty advising and ensuring that first-year students have classroom contact with full-time faculty, our results showed similar low levels of institutional commitment.

**QUESTION 2: How do institutions intervene in the workings of cultural capital in higher education?**

The second question we pose pertains to the broader societal function assigned to institutions. How do institutions mitigate the dynamic in which:

- a. institutions and students both work to optimize the cultural capital in their possession; and
- b. students whose type of cultural capital is not congruent with the cultural capital possessed by the institution are more likely to drop out?

*An Initial View from the Pilot Study*

The first insight we can offer here connects with our second point above: Institutions mitigate this dynamic by focusing efforts on groups of students holding cultural capital in forms that are relatively less congruent with the forms of cultural capital possessed by the institution at the organizational level. Examples might include low-income Latino students at one institution, high-performing students at another institution, women in the sciences at another.

Second, as a related point, institutions may or may not work at a general level on campus climate. Some of the efforts that institutions reported in our study were aimed at promoting a positive climate for diversity. Results from the student survey portion of this pilot study showed that a climate beneficial to diversity was positively associated with persistence on several campuses, but we have been unable to draw conclusions about this from the institutional survey. As we discussed earlier in this article, racial climate on campus is a central but underexamined component in the student success literature (Bensimon, 2007). In many cases, it is not clear that institutional efforts in this direction are effective in creating a positive climate. Fostering an equitable environment for students across racial/ethnic groups while situated within a White-dominated society is certainly a multilayered and complex task. However, linking theory to institutional actions will help to guide practice. As a first step, Bensimon underscores that it is important to work at multiple levels and to include concrete steps to support and develop practitioners' funds of knowledge regarding students of color and first-generation students in particular. Further research incorporating more complex measures of racial climate on campus is needed in order to understand more about how institutions affect student success, especially that of students of color.

Third, institutions invest in teaching and learning. Our survey results reflect another way that institutions mitigate the workings of cultural capital on campus. By investing in teaching and learning, institutions may well be investing in "conversations" that happen on campus, constructing shared communities of learning among students, faculty, and practitioners. Broadly speaking, this also reflects the faculty development activities that Bensimon (2007) has called for to cultivate campus practitioners' funds of knowledge regarding students. The results of the pilot study remain at a general level for now, but we hope to develop more specific measures in this area for the second iteration of the survey.

Finally, we need to look more broadly at both of the central questions posed above. Since institutions optimize cultural capital, it is important to examine what

they do to reproduce the workings of cultural capital in addition to efforts that mitigate its effects. Research aimed at “best practices” is not likely to unearth much on this topic. Pursuing both the negative and the positive questions will not only help complete the emergent picture but will also just as usefully highlight actionable implications.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our work with the College Board Pilot Study on Student Retention has engaged us in exploring the role of institutional policies and practices in student persistence in college. We have reviewed here several important issues of that study that complicate and define research in that arena. Using critiques from Bensimon (2007) and Berger (2000), we have explored the recurring gaps in the research surrounding student success—in particular, those gaps related to the roles of racial climate and cultural capital—that have prevented the expansion of research on institutional factors in student retention. Finally, by presenting an overview of processes and findings from our pilot study, we were able to discuss the tensions and issues through a concrete example. We also viewed an emerging picture of institutional practices surrounding retention. In the broadened theoretical frameworks and in our ongoing study, we see a promising way forward for this line of research. For us and other researchers to hone our understandings of the institutional role in student persistence, we will need to learn more about what institutions are doing and how they work to improve each student’s odds of persisting, succeeding, and graduating.

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