Retention planning for the future : challenges facing the rural land-grant university in the twenty-first century
by Janet Courtney Stryker

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Adult and Higher Education
Montana State University
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Abstract:
Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach combining significant research, expert testimony and insights from campus-based practitioners, this study applies qualitative futures research to the area of college student retention at rural land-grant universities. Exploring the range of social and economic influences on retention in public higher education and the range of long-term planning options available to retention administrators, managers and practitioners, this study anticipates how choice, chance and selected socio-economic trends combine to create a scenario for retention management at rural land-grant universities. The study identifies retention challenges facing rural land-grant universities in the twenty-first century and develops an institutional plan for college student persistence which will assist administrators and practitioners in anticipating and accommodating these changes.

Employing three distinct phases of analysis, this study synthesizes a broad view of future socio-economic challenges in order to provide a progressive, full-spectrum analysis of present and future retention challenges for individuals involved in university management, programming and planning. The research analysis process occurs on three levels allowing the study to be comprehensive as well as multifaceted. The exploration of future retention trends at rural land-grant universi-ties is conducted within the context of eight major categories: social trends; economic concerns; issues of public perception and accountability; technological innovations, integration and utilization concerns; changing demographics; trends in college student enrollment; faculty culture; and the evolving mission of the rural land-grant university. The review of significant literature represents the most formalized documented ideas regarding the prevailing socio-economic trends impacting retention at rural land-grant universities. A prospective study with interview data from four national retention experts adds a less formalized, more idealized approach to the topic tailored to the rural land-grant university tradition. Finally, a larger data set from sixteen campus-based practitioners adds an informal pragmatic layer to the analysis providing insight into the day-to-day realities of retention planning at rural land-grant universities. Contributing their opinions, based on present realities embedded in the historical, political and socio-economic trends unique to their institutions, campus-based retention practitioners present suggestions and examples for implementing retention theory in an informal practical fashion ranging from immediate efforts to strategic long-term planning.

Combining the issues of future trends, retention and new directions for rural land-grant universities, this report outlines both the retention challenges administrators, managers and practitioners may face in the future and the planning methods which may assist them with their long-term retention endeavors at the point of intersection between future socio-economic trends and persistence issues at rural land-grant universities. Beginning with a brief consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of the college student dropout and persistence phenomenon and an overview of the historical basis for the land-grant university tradition, the report focuses on the most evident social and economic trends and/or challenges impacting college student retention in the rural land-grant university setting. A qualitative futures-based methodology which relies extensively on the use of information and telecommunications

technologies provides a framework for data collection and analysis. A series of planning and programming recommendations is outlined for each socio-economic trend as well as a fourteen-step long-range plan for retention management at rural land-grant universities.

RETENTION PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE: CHALLENGES

FACING THE RURAL LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY

IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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of

Doctor of Education

in

Adult and Higher Education

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY-BOZEMAN
Bozeman, Montana

April 1999

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For nearly six decades, researchers in higher education have been studying the phenomenon of degree attainment for undergraduate students. This study of "student persistence" which began with an extensive consideration of college student dropout characteristics and, with the seminal work of Vincent Tinto (1975) and others (Astin, 1975), has since transcended the bounds of simply enumerating dropout traits into a holistic consideration of the process of attrition and retention from a student-institution interaction perspective. In fact, retention rates and satisfaction survey data have become key indicators at many colleges and universities of overall institutional effectiveness (Astin, Korn, Green, 1987). While the study of student persistence--the manner in which students matriculate, remain enrolled, earn a degree or drop out--is not new, the reasons for examining this phenomenon take on special significance as a new millennium approaches. According to Oscar Porter (1990) in his report on *Undergraduate Completion and Persistence at Four-Year Colleges and Universities*, the challenges faced by institutions of higher education may be perplexing and disheartening when considered from a turn-of-the century vantage point. Porter states, "students are likely to be older, non-Anglo, poorer both financially and educationally; and, of course, there probably won't be as many of them" (p.1). Attending to the diverse needs and meeting the subsequent demands of this new wave of students will be the central challenge for college student retention planners, programmers and managers as the next millennium progresses.

In a more detailed account of retention-related trends and concerns in higher education, the recently released *National Student Satisfaction Survey* (July, 1998) underscores Porter's predictions by indicating overall student satisfaction is declining at America's higher education institutions. Students have become increasingly concerned about the ris-

ing costs of tuition and are demanding increased accountability from their colleges and universities. Further, many students, traditional and nontraditional, are seeking more cost effective and efficient ways of accessing and attaining postsecondary education. The "exploding availability and capability of advanced technology-based teaching and learning" has prompted much discussion about creating "virtual universities" which exist only in cyberspace ("The Western Governor's," 1996, p.8). For colleges and universities interested in staying technologically competitive during the next ten to fifteen years, issues of student retention, attrition and persistence take on an entirely different perspective when viewed from the vantage point of a "virtual university."

While financial, technological and demographic changes will have a great impact on postsecondary institutions across the United States, it is the public institutions which will need to change and adapt the most to both fulfill their missions and meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. In fact, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges ("Facts About," 1997) documents that more than one third of all students enrolled in postsecondary degree programs in the United States are currently enrolled in four-year public institutions.

According to C. Peter Magrath (1996) in his report to the Kellogg Foundation on the Future of the State and Land-Grant Universities entitled *The Challenges and Opportunities for Land-Grant Universities in the Twenty-First Century,* land-grant universities in particular face a crisis of confidence as the dawn of a new era approaches. To best meet this crisis, Magrath posits, "universities must adapt and change" (p.17). State and land-grant universities "must recognize the new realities of diminished public resources while forthrightly facing [their] shortcomings" (p.18). Speaking specifically in terms of the broader demands facing land-grant institutions, Magrath continues with a description of the primary challenges these universities need to address:

> Clearly, these include our need to use faculty time more productively, our obligation to pay more attention to undergraduate students and to become full-time collaborators with public schools, and our duty to link research discoveries and educational insights with our states and communities in partnerships that strengthen our economy and society. And we dare not be afraid to use the new technologies--most of them spawned in our universities--to improve how we teach, learn, and

communicate in a world not defined by campus boundaries or restricted
by towers built of ivory (p.17-18).

In order for land-grant universities to best perform their "unique and vital mission as the intellectual and educational service centers for America in the twenty-first century," they must be financially stable and maintain public confidence (p.18).

Consistent with the decline in student satisfaction and the general erosion of public confidence mentioned above, public colleges and universities "have been challenged by their various constituents to demonstrate student success" (Sanders & Burton, 1996, p.555). In order to best meet the challenges of accountability from a "consumer satisfaction" perspective, many public colleges and universities have chosen to measure and demonstrate their successes in terms of retention and graduation rates. Using retention and graduation rates as an indication of productivity and outcomes, universities attempt to speak to students, community members, legislatures, and other constituents in a way which directly addresses public concerns. By demonstrating positive retention rates and graduation outcomes, pubic colleges and universities hope to assuage rising consumer anxiety and persistent questions concerning the operational efficiency of their institutions and the quality of the undergraduate education they produce.

Quantitative accountability measures focusing on retention and graduation rates, however, are not enough to convince a discerning public that institutions of public higher education are fulfilling their missions. According to Pamela Arrington (1994), Director of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities/Sallie Mae National Retention Project, "for those who look beyond simple measures of accountability, the real test of institutional effectiveness resides in how well it fosters student learning and achievement" (p.1). Land-grant institutions in particular have a history of being very successful in affording access to higher education for a broad range of traditional and nontraditional students. While this has had a great impact on the creation of more higher education opportunities for a wider range of students, it has not been equally efficacious in keeping those students in school and bringing them to graduation. In other words, *access* has not always meant *success* for many of the students in land-grant institutions. Land-grant universities that are aware of the financial, technological and demographic challenges which their students will be facing and how these challenges relate to fostering student achieve-

ment will be able to help a larger proportion of their students attain the educational outcomes they desire.

Understanding how to convert access into success is one of the keys to any retention effort. To be successful in their retention endeavors, land-grant universities "will need to focus on strategies for effecting institutional change" (Arrington, 1994, p.1).

> [Institutional] change cannot be achieved by superficial means. It will require fundamental reform of campus cultures to support diversity and conversion of the learning environment from a teacher-centered one to a learner-centered one (Arrington, 1994, p.1).

Not only must land-grant institutions prepare for external economic, technological and demographic challenges, they must also turn inward to redefine themselves and their missions. Given the wide range of changes and challenges projected for college student retention as higher education enters into a new century, it is crucial to the success of public colleges and universities--specifically rural land-grant institutions--that they be able to meet the retention challenges they will face in the year two-thousand and well beyond.

While it is critical for all land-grant institutions to plan carefully for the retention problems they will be facing in the next ten to fifteen years, rural land-grant institutions in particular will be faced with a unique set of challenges resulting from the specific geographic, demographic and cultural conditions which define them as a distinctive educational subgroup. Characteristically, most rural land-grant institutions are located in small towns where the university is the primary "industry." The surrounding communities are generally agrarian and politically conservative making it especially important for the institution to demonstrate student success and fiscal efficiency. Finally, many of the land-grant universities in this rural educational subgroup have the special function of being one of the few access points to the national information technology and telecommunications infrastructure for many rural Americans.

Some of the specific retention-related challenges rural institutions may face as the twenty-first century approaches include creating a climate where racially, ethnically and culturally diverse students will feel comfortable in a predominantly homogeneous setting; providing financial and other support to students and, in some cases, their families who have had to relocate to a small college town; and providing quality intellectual and

developmental experiences in an often fiscally conservative environment. Exploring and planning for the special retention challenges which rural land-grant institutions share is an area which merits serious consideration as these institutions, along with other land-grant universities, redefine their missions and services to meet future demands.

Problem

There is a paucity of higher education research which examines student achievement issues in terms of attrition, persistence and retention at rural land-grant universities. Specifically, no comprehensive qualitative analysis has been conducted regarding the retention challenges rural land-grant institutions face as they consider planning for the next ten to fifteen years. Further, there has been no holistic examination of retention plan development from a land-grant university perspective. Essentially, retention studies have not addressed three key issues. First, the specific needs of rural land-grant institutions have not been considered within a retention planning and programming framework. Second, higher education research has not looked to the future in terms of the retention challenges which may appear on the horizon for public higher education meeting the retention planning and programming needs of rural land-grant institutions. Finally, retention studies have not sought to develop an organizational plan which promotes and improves student persistence in accordance with the anticipated trends and challenges brought on by a new decade. This study addresses these three key issues and presents relevant social and economic megatrends as they apply to the rural land-grant university tradition.

Purpose

Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach which creatively combined current knowledge, experience and understanding, this study applied qualitative futures research to the area of college student retention at rural land-grant universities. The goal of this type of futures research was not to attempt to predict what retention planning and programming would look like during the next ten to fifteen years. Rather, this study sought to explore the range of planning options available to retention administrators, managers and practitio-

ners, and how these planning alternatives might be "affected by the interaction of choice and chance" (Welch & Watson, 1979, p.2). The purpose of this research was to identify the retention challenges facing the rural land-grant-university in the twenty-first century and develop an institutional plan for retention which optimally anticipates and accommodates the changes rural land-grant universities face as they move into the next century. In light of the urgent need to focus on retention challenges and plan development for land-grant universities, this study had two primary objectives:

1. Based on expert testimony and research, this study uncovered and reported on the retention challenges rural land-grant institutions would be facing during the next ten to fifteen years; and

2. Developed an institutional plan for retention which would accommodate those anticipated changes and challenges while allowing the rural land-grant institution to realize its goal of improved student success.

This study was unique because it focused on future retention trends within a socio-economic context. The research also centered on institutional capacity and ability as the units of analysis whereas most research in retention primarily deals with individual student behavior. Ideally, this approach not only would bring to light the retention programming and planning challenges institutions would be facing in the future, it also would afford rural land-grant institutions the opportunity to address their retention problems using a holistic systems-based approach. This hybridized approach also might allow rural land-grant universities to employ a plan for retention which would anticipate the challenges of a new century while giving these institutions the means to measure the consequences of positive organizational change as they move from student access to student success and persistence models.

Utilizing current research as well as data collected from various national retention experts and retention practitioners at sixteen rural land-grant universities, this study synthesizes a broad view of future retention challenges in order to provide a full-spectrum analysis of what may lie ahead on the higher education horizon for individuals involved in retention-related programming and planning. This scenario is considered in five distinct phases of this report. First, the research report highlights current national trends in retention theory and programming through the examination of significant research literature;

national retention data; and prominent studies showcasing current socio-economic trends as they relate to retention. A précis of land-grant history is also included as a contextual background for the study. Second, the study discusses current retention models and plans as well as other relevant organizational plans which may be used to anticipate and accommodate future trends, challenges and changes in long-term strategic retention planning. Third, the report presents a summary of the retention challenges facing rural land-grant universities based on first-hand interviews with national retention experts. The specific views of rural land-grant university retention practitioners regarding the future trends in retention programming and planning is the fourth topic introduced in the study. Lastly, this study provides a functional plan for college student retention at rural land-grant universities which addresses and accommodates the retention challenges these public institutions of higher education may face at the turn of the century.

Delimitations

The focus of this study was limited to sixteen, medium sized, rural land-grant universities. A list of these universities appears below:

1. University of Alaska-Fairbanks
2. Clemson University
3. University of Idaho
4. University of Maine
5. Mississippi State University
6. Montana State University
7. North Dakota State University
8. University of Nevada
9. New Mexico State University
10. Oregon State University
11. University of Rhode Island
12. South Dakota State University
13. Utah State University
14. University of Vermont
15. Washington State University
16. University of Wyoming

Based on nationally recognized sources of higher education data (AASCU, 1998, NASULGC, 1998), these peer institutions were chosen because they shared a number of similar characteristics. First, all of the institutions were federal land-grant institutions. Second, each university was located in a rural area (as defined in Chapter Three of this paper). Third, each of the universities in the study had a similar enrollment profile.

An exploration of the future trends and issues in retention programming for rural land-grant institutions was conducted within the context of eight major categories: social trends; financial/economic concerns; issues of public accountability; technological innovations, integration and utilization; changing student demographics; trends in college student enrollment; faculty culture; and the evolving mission of the rural land-grant university. Data was collected from two primary sources:

1. Nationally recognized retention experts (as defined in Chapter Three); and

2. Retention specialists at each of the selected land-grant universities.

Data collection was limited to a series of individual interviews in conjunction with specific descriptive and demographic statistics. Discussion related to future retention trends and issues rural land-grant institutions may face in the twenty-first century encompassed a period of ten to fifteen years unless otherwise specified.

Plan of This Report

This study is unique in its consideration of future trends for retention programming and planning at rural land-grant universities across the United States. Social and economic forces of change external and internal to the university are explored in three contexts, each adding to the information and insights gleaned from the others. The external categories of change which were explored included trends in society, the economy, public perceptions and accountability, and technology. Socio-economic trends internal to the rural land-grant university include demographic trends, student enrollment patterns, the culture of the faculty, and the changing mission of the rural land-grant university. The above eight external and internal social and economic trends provided the lens through which the future of retention programming, planning and management are viewed throughout this research report. This study engages a three-stage examination of these future social and economic trends by: (1) exploring the relevant and significant literature in each of the eight categories; (2) verifying and honing the future trend data from the literature review with nationally recognized retention experts; and (3) moving from a theoretical to a practical application of the eight categories with retention practitioners at sixteen rural land-grant universities. The Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions chapter synthesizes this

three phase examination process and presents a distilled view of retention plans for rural land-grant universities which may best anticipate and accommodate the major external and internal social and economic changes on the horizon for retention managers at these institutions.

This research report is presented in six chapters. The first chapter introduces the fundamental research questions for the study and demonstrates the need, purpose and procedures for the project. The second chapter presents a brief discussion of the theoretical foundations of college student retention as they apply to public colleges and universities and provides a brief historical consideration of the land-grant university tradition. This chapter also reviews the current social and economic trends and challenges impacting college student retention and, based on existing research, explores the new challenges public colleges and universities may be facing in the future. Chapter three describes the study's methodology beginning with the assumptions and rationale for a qualitative study design. Also included in the third chapter is a discussion of the study design; role of the researcher; the study parameters and data collection procedures; data recording and analysis procedures; analysis; and methods for verification. The fourth chapter of this study introduces the findings from a prospective study conducted with four national retention experts. This chapter contains excerpts from interviews with these national retention experts outlining their perceptions of what lies ahead in terms of future retention challenges and major socio-economic issues of concern. Chapter five introduces the findings from campus-based retention practitioners as they considered the future of retention programming and planning at rural land-grant universities in light of the major socio-economic trends impacting their universities. An overview of current retention plans and models at these rural land-grant institutions also is included. Chapter six presents a summary of the research as well as recommendations, conclusions and implementation suggestions based on the results of the study. The chapter closes with suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Anticipating the future as it relates to the central theme of college student retention and retention programming at rural land-grant universities requires a solid foundation in retention theory as well as a broadly defined view of social and economic trends as they relate to public higher education. Predicting the intersection between college student retention theory and practice, and future socio-economic movements is the key to understanding and developing a scenario for long-term retention planning at rural land-grant universities. This chapter provides an overview of the broad issues and socio-economic trends which will influence college student retention or attrition and retention-related programming as our society and public higher education institutions respond to change.

After conducting preliminary research regarding retention for this study, it became evident that planning for the future as it relates to college student retention at rural land-grant universities necessitated an exploration of literature from several different traditions. The purpose of this chapter is to address some of the central theories pertaining to college student retention and to provide a conceptual framework which explores the literature from four distinct traditions: public higher education, college student development, sociology and organizational theory. The first two disciplines provided the basic foundation for this study. By using public higher education history and theory combined with college student development theory, a definition of retention was established which guided the research within the context of the rural land-grant tradition. Related literature from sociological and organizational disciplines was used to develop a clear picture of the main socio-economic trends which may effect the future of retention at rural land-grant colleges and universities and to conceptualize a plan which would be most appropriate for retention planning at these particular organizations. This integrative literature review is presented

below in seven sections which trace the development and traditions of land-grant institutions within the U.S. higher education system; outline the basic theories regarding retention and present a working definition of the term for the purpose of this study; discuss the need for and impact of retention programming at rural land-grant institutions; give a perspective on the future and future planning in public higher education; review the external and internal socio-economic changes facing public higher education; and explore the organizational changes these schools must consider in order to adapt and plan for the future. The seventh and final section of this chapter reviews current retention plans as well as other relevant organizational plans which lend themselves to future changes within the rural land-grant university context. At best, predicting and planning for the future involves a great deal of educated guesswork and some luck. Hopefully, this chapter will challenge and stimulate the process of planning for college student retention as rural land-grant universities prepare for a new century.

Historical Context

In order to plan for and successfully implement retention programming at rural land-grant institutions, it is critical to understand the nature, mission and intended function of the land-grant university within the context of the U.S. system of higher education. The following section presents a brief historical overview of the creation of the land-grant concept and specifically addresses the three-fold mission of these institutions which has become an established tradition in a consistently changing society.

The land-grant college or university can be defined as "an institution that has been designated by its state legislature or Congress to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890" ("The Land-Grant Tradition," 1995, p.3). The original mission of the land-grant college had four primary components: to teach agriculture, military tactics, mechanical arts and liberal arts subjects so that members of the "working classes" could obtain both a liberal and practical education. Senator Justin Smith Morrill from Vermont sponsored the land-grant legislation and is widely credited for having ensured its enactment both in 1862 for the First Morrill Act and in 1890 for the Second Morrill Act.

In 1887, Senator Morrill clarified the purpose of the 1862 Act and, thereby, the purpose of the land-grant college by stating the following in his address to the Massachusetts Agricultural College:

> The land-grant colleges were founded on the idea that a higher and broader education should be placed in every state within the reach of those whose destiny assigns them to, or who may have the courage to choose industrial locations where the wealth of nations is produced; where advanced civilization unfolds its comforts, and where a much larger number of the people need wider educational advantages, and impatiently await their possession....It would be a mistake to suppose it was intended that every student should become either a farmer or a mechanic when the design comprehended not only instruction for those who may hold the plow or follow a trade but such instruction as any person might need--with the world all before them where to choose-- and without the exclusion of those who might prefer to adhere to the classics (quoted in "The Land-Grant Tradition," 1995, pp.5-6).

With the establishment of the land-grant university, Morrill's primary aim was to move the opportunity for higher education beyond the American elite to the "industrial classes" making a practical education accessible to all individuals.

As of 1999, there exists at least one land-grant institution in every state and territory of the United States including the District of Columbia. Several Southern states have two land-grant institutions resulting from the Second Morrill Act of 1890 which provided additional endowments for the creation of separate land-grant institutions for African Americans in certain Southern states. These institutions are typically known as the "1890 Land-Grants." Many Western and Plains states have one or more of the "1994 land-grants" which are part of the 29 Native American tribal colleges. Land-grant status was conferred by Congress on the 29 Native American colleges in October 1994, as a provision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act.

Since their creation in the latter half of the 19th century, land-grant colleges and universities have provided the world with a unique system of higher education which is widely accessible to a broad cross-section of society and, prolific in its discovery and dissemination of relevant information, designed to contribute positively to society as a whole. Consistent with the mission espoused by Senator Morrill in 19th century, today's land-grant colleges and universities "continue to fulfill their democratic mandate for openness,

accessibility, and service to the people" ("The Land-Grant Tradition," 1995, p.4). Further, many land-grant institutions have established themselves as some of the United States' most distinguished research universities. The land-grant tradition and heritage have afforded millions of students the opportunity to study nearly any academic discipline "and explore fields of inquiry far beyond the scope envisioned in the original land-grant mission" ("The Land-Grant Tradition," 1995, p.4). In fact, the land-grant university system in the United States has afforded the largest segment of people in the history of the world the benefits of a college or university education.

College Student Retention Theory Overview

The persistence/attrition phenomenon in higher education has been the central focus of many institutional reviews, evaluations and studies since the latter half of the 1970's and, given the major economic, technological and demographic changes during the last twenty years, the retention phenomenon continues to be at the forefront of many college and university planning scenarios. During the past two decades, a number of definitive reviews and studies have been presented which provide the theoretical foundations for any investigation or research effort surrounding the issue of college student retention. The following paragraphs highlight the retention/attrition/persistence theories which have made the greatest contributions to the body of research and literature dealing with retention. Following this review, a definition of retention will be presented which provides the basic guide for the data collection and analysis for this research project.

The field of study regarding college student retention/attrition has a long and varied history when one considers the plethora of models which have been advanced to explain the college student dropout phenomenon. While most of these theorists are adept at describing actual leaving behaviors, in a practical sense, the bulk of early retention/attrition scholars were unable to link cause and effect. In terms of providing constructs for actual retention-oriented programming, many models fell short of describing what caused students to leave their post-secondary institutions and they neglected the role the institution played in the individual's decision to drop out. Finally, a great number of studies failed to provide a definition of student departure which was consistent and accurate.

Theories of college student retention generally fall into one of three categories: (1) psychological models of educational persistence; (2) environmental/social theories; and (3) organizational theories. Viewed individually, each of the three disciplines examines the retention phenomenon from a distinct perspective. The psychological studies (Ethington, 1990) view the act of staying or leaving as purely individually motivated. The decision to depart is more a reflection of the individual's personality and ability to cope with college life. Sociological/environmental studies of student retention (Manski & Wise, 1983; Iwai & Churchill, 1982), on the other hand, tend to emphasize the impact of economic, institutional and other outside social forces (race, gender, status attainment, etc.) on an individual's decision to stay or leave college. Finally, organizational theorists (Bean, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986), look at the role of the higher education organization or institution in the student's departure decision. In essence, how satisfied was the individual with the institution in terms of the distinct organizational characteristics (campus climate, institutional bureaucracy, policies, etc.) and the benefits offered by the school (status, prestige, grades, training). Organizational theorists tend to view institutions like many other organizations--as a place of work--when they consider the issue of college student retention. In their view, the organizational ethos and culture plays a fundamental role in the retention process. Like other places of "work," institutions of higher education will retain more "workers" (students) by creating an environment where individuals have the opportunity to participate and be rewarded for their work.

As Tinto (1993) notes in his work *Leaving College*, each of the perspectives taken by the psychological, socio-environmental, and organizational theorists are valuable, but in a decidedly limited capacity. As the study of college student retention has been examined across each of the three disciplines, one critical component of college life has been consistently neglected. Tinto's (1993) articulation of this omission is straightforward: "That past theories of student departure should so underestimate, if not wholly ignore, the role the setting of the institution plays in the withdrawal process is surprising" (p.90). Viewed more holistically, within a social context, the phenomenon of college student retention becomes less truncated. Considering the institutional environment as a major component in the college student attrition and/or persistence equation broadens the scope of retention theory from the individual perspective to the cultural, community and physical impact of

the institution. Given this environmental point of view, an individual student's decision to leave or stay can be viewed within the social constructs of the institution as well as the greater community. It is this broad view of college student retention which transcends the consideration of individual departure or persistence patterns to include the environmental and social impacts of the institution that provides the foundation for this study.

Six Major Retention Theories

During the course of this research effort, the theories of six major retention and student development theorists were used to both provide a framework for and guide the investigation. Most of the theories employed in this paper provide the background for systematically considering the future of college student retention programming and planning within the context of projected socio-economic trends during the next ten to fifteen years. A majority of the theories considered in this section fall into the environmental/ sociological construct of college student retention theory as described in the above section. More specifically, the theories listed below describe the "college impact models of student change" category of college student development research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p.57). These theories assign a "prominent and specific role to the context in which the student acts and thinks" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p.57).

> [Institutional] structures, policies, programs, and services (whether academic or nonacademic), as well as the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the people who occupy (and to some extent define) institutional environments, are all seen as potential sources of influence on students' cognitive and affective changes" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p.57).

It should be noted for the purpose of this section that, in most cases, the term "college student" refers to a traditionally-aged student who falls somewhere within the range of 18 to 24 years old. Drawing much of their structure from student development theory, these environmental/sociological models view the college student as an "active participant" in his/her own personal growth process, however, the college impact models take the concept of personal development one step further by including the impact of environment and context as major components of college student development. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discuss in their definitive work *How College Affects Students*, college impact models of college student development and change view the environment "as an active force

that not only affords opportunities for change-inducing encounters but can also, on occasion, require a student to respond [to change] (p.57). As many college impact theorists assert, "change is influenced not only by whether and how the student responds but also by the nature and intensity of the environmental stimulus" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p.57). One of the most common and salient features of the theories used in this study is the basic assumption that the university environment has a profound impact on college student retention. While other factors also may have a role in the individual student's decision to depart or stay, the institution's impact on each student plays a major role in his or her development and ability to achieve his or her educational objectives.

One of the earliest sociological-college impact models which addresses the college student retention phenomenon stems from the work of Alexander Astin (1970a, 1970b, 1971, 1972, 1975). Beginning with his "input-process-output" model which has been refined over the past thirty years to the "input-environment-outcome" (I-E-O) model, Astin (1993) has developed a guide for considering the impact of college on a student's level of individual development. The fundamental elements of the model are defined in the following manner:

> *Inputs* refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution; *environment* refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and *outcomes* refers to the student's characteristics *after* exposure to the environment (p.7, emphasis in original text).

Based on this definition of the college student development process, Astin (1993) suggests "change or growth in the student during college is determined by comparing outcome characteristics with input characteristics" (p.7). In terms of retention program planning, the I-E-O model provides administrators and other college personnel with a process to help them to realize their desired education and retention-related outcomes. While this linear model appears straight-forward in its design, actual implementation involves a great deal of uncertainty and improvisation on the part of the program designers and policy-makers. Even a veteran university administrator would find it difficult to project precisely which input, environment, and outcome variables need to be assessed in order to develop programming which would enhance desired student outcomes.

Astin (1993) also has proposed a second theory which has direct implications for college student retention and development. His "theory of involvement" is very basic in its foundation: student learning is directly related to student involvement. This simple but powerful concept underscores the immense potential student involvement has for improving the quality of the overall college student experience both affectively and cognitively. "Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups" (Astin, 1993, p.394). In terms of retention, the more involved a student is in the overall college experience, the more likely he or she is to stay and realize his or her personal and educational goals.

The second, and perhaps most cited, sociological/college impact model of college student retention stems from the work of Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987,1989, 1993). Tinto's (1993) longitudinal interactional sociological model seeks to illuminate the college student dropout phenomenon by focusing on the individual within multiple social contexts. Specifically, Tinto asserts student persistence is directly related to the degree in which the student is integrated into the formal and informal academic and social communities at the university. Tinto (1993) argues:

> Individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experience, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution. The individual's experience in those systems as indicated by his/her intellectual (academic) and social (personal) integration continually modifies his or her intentions and commitments (pp. 113-115).

Positive experiences, where the individual student is made to feel more integrated into the academic and social communities of the school, reinforce the student's desire to persist. Negative experiences erode the student's intentions and commitments and increase an individual's tendency to depart.

Moving beyond the individual to the institution, Tinto's (1993) longitudinal model of college student attrition also considers the impact of the academic and social communities within a given institution as well as the external communities surrounding the school. Thus, the model also takes into consideration the impact of the interaction between a stu-

dent and his/her external community affiliations, obligations and commitments. By extending his model beyond the individual, Tinto provides a structure which allows researchers, practitioners and policy makers/administrators an avenue to increased understanding of college student development and institutional policy-making.

Pascarella (1980, 1984a, 1984b) developed a conceptual process model of college student attrition which stresses the informal contact between students and faculty as a critical component of college student retention. In this model, the background characteristics of the student interact with several other institutional variables (school image, policies, size, academic standards) to influence the informal contact a student has with faculty and other on-campus social groups (i.e., peers, student organizations). The nature of this informal contact, in turn, impacts educational outcomes (grades, intellectual development, career development and overall satisfaction with the institution) which directly affect the student's decision to leave or stay.

Following his conceptual process model of student attrition, Pascarella began to seek causes for college student attrition. Using Tinto's (1975) work as a springboard, Pascarella (1985a) outlined a causal model of college student outcomes which is particularly relevant to the study of the attrition/retention phenomenon. Unlike Tinto, however, Pascarella's model includes a "more explicit consideration of both an institution's structural characteristics and it's general environment" (Pascarella &Terenzini, 1991, p.53). The development of each student is "a function of the direct and indirect effects of six major sets of variables" (Pascarella &Terenzini, 1991, p.53). The variables include the student's background/precollege traits; structural/organizational characteristics of institutions; interactions with agents of socialization; institutional involvement; quality of student effort; and learning and cognitive development (Pascarella &Terenzini, 1991). Again, the defining features of this theory underscore the college student-institutional-environment interaction while also taking into account the external socio-economic agents of change which may impact a student's decision to persist or depart.

Building on the basic theoretical assumptions advanced by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), Bean (1983, 1986) draws upon theoretical sources which go beyond, yet add to, the sociological/environmental foundations of most retention/attrition/persistence theories. Bean (1983) advanced the notion of student intent--intent to stay (or leave)--into the attrition

equation. Rooted in the psychological discipline where the contention is that "there is a strong relationship between attitudes, intentions, and behavior and that behaviors and attitudes do reflect intentions," Bean's model of college student attrition shows a direct association between a student's attitude about school and his or her intent to leave (Eaton & Bean, 1995, pp.617-618). Further, Bean (1983) demonstrated a strong relationship between a student's level of intent and his or her actual actions as they related to staying or leaving an institution. Bean (1990) augmented his original model with the addition of several variables or background attributes which influence both academic and social integration. "Retention can be influenced by environmental pull, a set of factors external to the institution, such as finances or family responsibilities, that draw an individual away from college" (Eaton & Bean, 1995, p.618). In Bean's updated model, the level of a student's academic and social integration into his or her college or university contributes directly to the student's attitude toward staying or leaving. The characteristics of the institution also have an impact on student attitude. In fact, Bean (1990) contends the attitude of the student will color his or her perception of the person-to-institution fit and directly influence his or her level of commitment.

Finally, in his most recent work, Bean (with Eaton, 1995) again delves into the psychological realm to further explain and expand upon the retention/attrition/persistence phenomenon. Using approach/avoidance theory, Eaton and Bean (1995) develop a conceptual model of the college student attrition phenomenon. In this study, "approach behaviors were associated with successful integration and avoidance behaviors were associated with poor integration" (Eaton & Bean, p.636). Students who take a more active/assertive approach to both academic and social situations at their institutions stand a better chance of achieving their academic goals than avoidant/passive students. This model exposes a not-so-subtle irony in student behaviors and attitudes which has serious implications for practitioners as well as administrators. Those students who are most likely to persist have a positive attitude about the person-institution fit and come with the intent to complete a degree program. They also tend to exhibit more approach (assertive/active) behaviors than the passive (avoidant) student. The more assertive students also tend to take advantage of retention-related programming (student organizations, tutoring, activities, orientations). In many schools across the country, retention programming is geared toward the approach-

oriented student. Students must find tutors, seek-out counselors and advisors and actively approach most programs designed to offer academic and/or social adjustment assistance. Eaton and Bean (1995) contend avoidant students--those students at the highest level of risk for attrition--will not take advantage of the bulk of retention-related services. Based on their findings, Eaton and Bean recommend "proactive and sensibly intrusive" retention programs to better target those students most at-risk for leaving (p.636).

Taking a much more applied approach to the study of college student retention, Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates (1985) present a very practical overview of and guide to the issue of retention. Beginning with a very simple viewpoint of retention and extending through an examination of several case studies of institutions with successful retention programs, Noel et al. build on the work of Astin (1970a, 1970b, 1971, 1972, 1975), Tinto (1975), Pascarella (1980), Bean (1983), and other retention experts (Terenzini, 1982; Upcraft, 1984) to create a step-by-step guide to increasing student retention on any given campus. The cornerstone of their study is founded upon one simple principle: retention is not a goal.

> [Retention] is the result or by-product of improved programs and services in our classrooms and elsewhere on campus that contribute to student success. If retention alone becomes the goal, institutions will find themselves engaged in trying to hold students at all costs. (Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates, 1985, p.1).

Noel et al. (1985) make an important and unique contribution to the literature on college student retention by providing an exhaustive plan to promote and improve student success, satisfaction and retention campus-wide. Placing an emphasis on quality and a "people-oriented" campus culture, Noel et al. extend the responsibility for retention programming to faculty, staff and administrators at all levels. While acknowledging the economic implications of retention, they emphasize the importance of each individual student and the talent(s) he or she brings to the institution. It is their contention that if the student is viewed as the focal point of the retention effort, purposeful planning and a push toward quality will follow. The specifics of the plan advanced by Noel et al. will be examined later in this chapter.

Many of the studies (Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates, 1985; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993) conducted during the past two decades, which consider

the college student retention phenomenon, emphasize the importance of the first year experience in terms of keeping students at a given institution of higher education. In fact, as many institutions continue to deal with fiscal crisis, the practice of front-loading retention efforts toward entering first year students has become increasingly more accepted and popular. At the forefront of the effort to improve quality and educational efficacy for entering students stand Upcraft and Gardner (1989) with their seminal work *The Freshman Year Experience*. Upcraft and Gardner present a strong argument to support their contention that a student's experiences during his or her first year of college determines, to a great extent, his or her success in following years. These first-year experiences also contribute substantially to the likelihood of a student's ability to persist in higher education to degree completion. In an effort to outline a plan of action for colleges and universities which specifically addresses freshmen needs, Upcraft and Gardner identify strategies which address the factors vital to new student success. Not unlike the Noel et al. (1985) work described above, Upcraft and Gardner present a practitioner's guide which systematically addresses a range of foundational retention issues from college student development to policy concerns which provide the administrator a blueprint for course and program planning and implementation.

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) assert an institution must operate in a manner which values freshmen success over recruitment. They define success in developmental and pragmatic terms which extend beyond earning enough credits to graduate. Student success, broadly defined, means developing academic and intellectual competence; establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; developing identity; deciding on a career and life-style; maintaining personal health and wellness; and developing an integrated philosophy of life (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). In order for students to achieve success, the college or university must provide them with every opportunity to realize their goals. Ethically speaking, an institution who admits a student owes that student a fair chance for advancement or progress toward success. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) present ten institutional "beliefs" or obligations they feel are necessary to facilitate freshmen success:

- Institutions have an obligation to support and enhance the freshman year, not only because retention may be increased, but because it is our moral

and educational obligation to create a collegiate environment with the max-
imum opportunity for student success.

- Institutions can intentionally and successfully help freshmen achieve their
  academic and personal goals by providing not only supportive and chal-
  lenging classroom experiences, but enriched out-of-classroom experiences
  as well.

- The key to freshmen success is involvement.

- Involvement is enhanced by interaction between freshmen and others in the
  academic community, including faculty, staff, student affairs professionals,
  and other students.

- Institutions must take into account the racial, cultural, ethnic, age, and gen-
  der diversity of freshmen.

- Faculty involvement is vital to freshmen success.

- Freshmen should be treated with dignity and respect.

- Institutions should have very deliberate goals for freshmen.

- There are very specific and proven ways of enhancing freshmen success, if
  there is an institutional commitment to doing so.

- The freshmen seminar is a proven and effective way of enhancing freshman
  success (pp.4-6).

Institutions committed to the development of the whole student, and where a culture of

support and understanding is fostered, will create an environment of success for freshmen.

These are institutions which understand the developmental needs of entering students as

well as the impact of their own institutional environment on this population.

Defining Retention

Retention, attrition, persistence, withdrawal, dropping-out, stopping-out, and leaving

are all terms which have been used to describe the college student drop-out phenomenon.

One of the most pivotal issues concerning this research project was how to define reten-

tion, or the process of dropping-out, within the context of the study. As one reviews the

primary literature on college student retention, it is clear that there is no single agreed

upon definition for the term. Some theorists and researchers (Astin, 1993) tend to define

college student retention with "the most stringent measure: completing a bachelor's degree

in four years" (p.192). While others (Tinto, 1982, 1987, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini,

1991; Bean, 1986) describe retention as a phenomenon which can only be defined from the perspective of the individual, institution or other entity describing leaving behaviors and patterns. Finally, there is the notion that retention should not be defined as a goal or an outcome, rather, "retention is the result or by-product of improved programs and services in our classrooms and elsewhere on campus that contribute to student success" (Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates, 1985, p.1). Upcraft and Gardner (1989) further the notion of viewing college student retention in terms of student success by focusing on freshmen or new entering students exclusively. In their view, retention is an outcome of success which allows students to "make progress toward fulfilling their educational and personal goals" (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p.2).

For the purpose of this study, two major retention models (Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates, 1985; Tinto, 1993) were examined and synthesized to provide the framework from which a working definition of college student retention could be employed. The foundational component of this working definition of retention stems from Tinto (1993). The first step in defining retention requires an in-depth consideration of college student attrition patterns. Once the definition for attrition or dropping-out is established, the practical matter of retaining students may be discussed. According to Tinto (1993), there are two broad categories of departure to consider: institutional departure and system departure. Institutional departure describes the process a student follows when leaving an individual institution while system departure is the term used to describe the student's departure from the entire university system.

It is important to distinguish between institutional and system departure because of the variable nature of the individual student's departure process. While each student who leaves a given institution looks the same to the individual school, from a broader systemic perspective, departure patterns fall into five general categories. Those students who leave one institution and transfer directly to another school are considered immediate transfers. Viewed from the system perspective, these students are considered "completers" if they finish their degree within four to five years (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) goes on to describe the remaining four general categories of departure by discussing the other avenues a departing student may take: