

Research Briefs

Which Students Persist?

Students who leave the institution without completing a degree or transferring to another institution are of special concern to South Texas College (STC). These students, commonly known as “stop-outs,” represent students who came to college in a semester, remained enrolled throughout that semester, yet do not continue their enrollment at the focal institution or other institution of higher education.

At South Texas College, students who display sporadic enrollment patterns, enroll part-time, and struggle academically are less likely to persist. This analysis presents the results of a quantitative comparison of Persisting vs Non-Persisting students for Fall 2014 semester. Non-persisting students were more likely to have lower GPA's, enroll part-time, be assessed as “not college ready” under the Texas Success Initiative (TSI), and to have been on academic probation or suspension at some point in their academic careers. Non-Persisting students were also more likely to be continuing students and thus have gaps in their enrollment in college. To a lesser degree, Non-Persisting students were also less likely to have applied or received financial aid.

NARRATIVE PROFILES

Persisting Students: Those who persist are more likely to be continuing students and exhibit enrollment intensity. These students are more likely to be full-time and more likely to be continuing from previous semesters. They consistently enroll every term without breaks between semesters. They also are more likely to be college ready, have higher term and cumulative GPA's, and be in good academic standing. To a smaller degree, they may also be more likely to apply for and receive financial assistance.

Non-Persisting Students: The non-persisting group of students are more likely to be returning students. Returning students are those that have taken a break from enrolling in a post-secondary institution. They also exhibit sporadic enrollment patterns across semesters and are more likely to be part-time students when they do enroll. The non-persisting student also struggles academically as they are more likely to be not college ready, have lower term and cumulative GPA's, and be placed on academic probation or suspension. To a smaller degree they may also be less likely to have applied and received financial aid.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Research & Analytical Services conducted a quantitative investigation to determine which factors were associated with students dropping from the college before the end of the semester. This study found that dropped students were more likely to be technical majors, have lower GPA's, not be college ready, less likely to have received financial aid, and to be first time students or continuing students. In 2011, RAS also conducted a qualitative study of students applied but did not register for courses at STC. The study identified three main catalysts for drops: enrollment at other institutions, financial aid difficulties, and conflicts with employment. This study similarly examined the persistence of students to identify factors that distinguished Persisting vs Non-Persisting students.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this analysis was to derive a profile of a typical STC student who does and does not persist across fall semesters. Persisting students are those who were enrolled in Fall 2014 and continued their enrollment up until the following Fall 2015. The total traditional enrollment for Fall 2014 was 18,820. Of these, 3,072 graduated and 1,071 transferred to another institution (primarily UTRGV). These students were not included in the analysis and thus the remaining total population for this analysis was 14,677. Of which, 8,611 (59%) persisted to the following Fall 2015 and 6,066 (41%) did not persist.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results for factors examined in this analysis. For each of the characteristics, the proportion of students are given for both Persisting and Non-Persisting groups. For continuous variables such as GPA, means are given for each group. The characteristics are categorized as demographics, enrollment type, credit hours, financial aid, and academic standing and GPA. The only factor that that was not statistically significant was total credits attempted—all other variables were statistically significant. Some factors, while being statistically significant, were not substantive.

Enrollment Type. The proportion of Returning students was higher for Non-Persisting students (24%) than for Persisters (13%). Returning students are those that are returning to the institution after a previous gap in their enrollment at any post-secondary institution. Conversely, Continuing students made up a larger proportion of the Persisting group (53%) than the Non-Persisting group (42%). Continuing students are those that were also enrolled in the previous long semester. This suggests that Non-Persisting student may in general have sporadic enrollment patterns across terms. Persisting students were also more likely to be full-time (50%) compared to Non-Persisting (39%).

Table 1: Fall 2014 Fall-to-Fall Persistence Student Characteristics

Demographics	Persisted	Not-Persisted
Male	41%	44%
First Generation	57%	55%
Age (mean)	24	25
Major		
Academic Majors	54%	53%
Technical Majors	39%	41%
Enrollment Type		
Continuing	53%	42%
Returning	13%	24%
Full-time	50%	39%
Credit Hours		
Total Credits Earned	38	34
Total Credits Attempted	49	49
Ratio of Earned/Attempted	.78	.69
Financial Aid		
Completed FAFSA 1415	83%	78%
Rcvd Financial Aid (any type)	79%	72%
Rcvd Pell	70%	64%
Academic Standing and GPA		
TSI College Ready	59%	47%
Good Standing	90%	81%
Fall 2014 Term GPA	2.71	1.70
Cumulative GPA	2.84	2.19
Total	8,611 (59%)	6,066 (41%)

Note: Percentages may not equal to 100 due to rounding or exclusion of groups.

Academic Standing and GPA. For these sets of factors the focus was in the academic performance and academic standing. Results showed the biggest difference between groups was in the proportion of students deemed College Ready—with Persisting students being more likely to be TSI College-Ready (59%) than Non-Persisting students (47%). Students are deemed college ready by passing state appointed exams in reading, writing and math, or passing developmental coursework. Additionally some students such as military, dual enrollment, or technical students may be waived or exempt from college ready criteria.

Similarly, Persisting students also exhibited higher academic performance. Ninety percent of the persisting group were in good academic standing (i.e. not on probation or suspension), compared to 81% of the Non-Persisting group. The end of term GPA for the Persisting group was also one letter grade higher compared to Non-Persisters (2.71 vs. 1.70 respectively). End of term cumulative GPA was also higher for Persisters than the Non-Persisters (2.84 vs. 2.19 respectively).

Credit Hours. Persisting students also had slightly higher number of credits earned by the end of the fall term than did Non-Persisting students (38 credits hours for Persisters vs 34 for Non-Persisters). Interestingly, however, Total Credits Attempted was 49 for both groups. The ratio of earned to attempted credit hours was higher for the Persisting group (.78) than for the Non-Persisting group (.69).

Financial Aid. These factors examined if differences existed between groups as to whether or not they had applied or received financial aid during the AY 14-15 year. Persisting students were more likely to have completed a FAFSA, 83% of Persisting student had completed a FAFSA compared to 78% of Non-Persisting students. Persisting students were also more likely to have received any financial assistance (79%) and to have received Federal Pell Grants—70% for Persisters vs 64% for Non-Persisters.

Student Demographics. Overall the differences in Persisting and Non-Persisting students were minimal in relation to various demographics examined. While males were slightly more representative of the Non-Persisting group (44%) than the Persisting students (41%), compared to other factors examined the differences were small. Similarly, mean age for the groups were virtually the same (24 for Persisting vs 25 for Non-Persisting). Interestingly, the proportion of First Generation College students was also close to equal with 57% of Persisting students and 55% of Non-Persisting students.

Major. The differences in selected majors were also minimal. Academic majors were more higher for Persisting students (54%) compared to Non-Persisting students (53%). Technical majors were lower for the Persisting students (39%) compared to Non-Persisting students (41%).

CONCLUSION: WHAT MATTERS

While all results for comparisons between groups were significantly different (aside from attempted credit hours) it is important to distinguish which differences are practically meaningful when considering interventions, policies and practices aimed to assist students. Student demographic characteristics had the lowest differences on student persistence. While financial status did show some modest differences, results were still quite small. Enrollment type, on the other hand, seems to play a more substantial role in persistence. Full time and Continuing students made up a larger proportion of Persisting group. This can be conceptualized as enrollment intensity. Persisting students are more likely to enroll continuously across terms, and enroll in more credit hours when they do enroll.

Given that many findings are similar to what was found for dropped students (see brief here), many of the initiatives that serve to keep students from dropping may also be effective at increasing persistence. The differences in characteristics between Dropped students and Non-Persisting students was the role that major played—technical students were more likely to Drop but this effect was not found in Non-Persisters. Also, the role financial aid played was bigger for Dropped students than for Non-Persisting students.

Academic characteristics also play a substantial role in Persistence. Persisting students are more likely to be college ready, in good academic standing, and have higher GPA's. Non-Persisting students thus may more likely struggle academically as well as have sporadic enrollment patters. Thus interventions, policies and practices aimed at increasing persistence should focus on assisting struggling students with their courses. Another focus can be in encouraging student to enroll full-time and to enroll continuously across terms. Registration recruitment efforts should focus on reaching out to stop-out students and current students in persistence efforts.