

STUDENT GRATITUDE AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN SATISFACTION AND INTENTION TO COMPLETE COLLEGE EDUCATION

Jungki Lee, Korea University at Sejong, Sejong, South Korea
Sekhar Anantharaman, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, PA, U.S.A.

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ABSTRACT

The steady decline in college completion intention has been a persistent and pervasive concern in higher education institutions across cultures. This study proposes and empirically examines student gratitude as a potential variable that might exert a worthwhile influence upon students' undergraduate degree completion intention. The study employs a research framework that includes student satisfaction, students' gratitude towards the educational institution, and their intention to complete undergraduate education. Data collection using questionnaire survey was conducted at a prominent college of business situated in South Korea. The research findings provide a meaningful avenue of insight into the psyche and behavior of college students. The results highlight the importance of both cognitive and emotional factors for students to remain in school. Both managerial and academic implications of the study are presented.

Keywords: *student retention, student dropout, student satisfaction, sense of appreciation, gratitude, college completion intention, intention to complete college*

1. INTRODUCTION

The steady decline in the college completion rate has been a major concern in many schools. Regardless of many initiatives universities implement to keep their students on campus, college dropout rates have been going up each year (Thomas 2013). The reduced student enrollment leaves several undesirable consequences for higher education institutions including a decrease in financial outcomes, tarnished program reputation, and even uncertain program sustainability. To deal with the issue, most colleges view students as customers, adopt student satisfaction as one of the strategic underpinnings, and implement a diversity of programs to retain them on campus. When it comes to the issue of student retention, however, the prevalent perspective is founded upon a vague conventional wisdom that colleges where students receive a better quality of educational experience would serve to enhance the students' satisfaction. This factor would then be a sufficient condition for students to stay in the program. Though valid to some extent, the legitimacy of this conventional notion has been challenged. Stewart (1997) and Yu and Kim (2008) have claimed that satisfaction may be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for one to maintain one's loyalty to a brand. That is, several satisfied customers defect for a host of reasons. Similarly, it is entirely possible that students satisfied with their educational experiences might not necessarily be students that persist until they obtain their degrees. It would be naive for a college to hold onto the presumption that its satisfied students would remain on campus until their graduation. A fresh, new insight into the issue of student retention is warranted.

Recent marketing studies dealing with customer retention have identified customer gratitude as a possible factor underlying successful relationships between buyers and sellers. The main tenet of the perspective is that grateful customers tend to remain in the relationship with the seller. Specifically, those customers that have an appreciative attitude toward a brand, service provider, or seller, are found to be repeat customers, who spread word of mouth appreciation, and exhibit extensive engagement behaviors (Huang 2015; Palmatier et al. 2009). This study is inspired by the positive effects of such customer gratitude upon their relationship behaviors. On campus, students experiencing a positive college experience which serves to enhance their personal as well as professional growth, may go beyond being satisfied with their academic institution but might also develop a grateful attitude towards it. This kind of desirable gratitude-based attitude could be key for one to remain in a long-term relationship (Cialdini 2001). A higher education