Showing the love: Predictors of student loyalty to undergraduate institutions

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This article advances the notion that undergraduates may be considered student-customers whose relationship with and loyalty to their institutions can be managed by college educators. The Student University Loyalty Instrument administered to 1,207 undergraduates at three comprehensive Midwestern institutions assessed the predictors of student loyalty. Results suggest student behavioral and attitudinal factors most highly predict loyalty. Strategies for faculty and student affairs professionals to develop and manage student loyalty are shared.

Student persistence is the most frequently studied topic in American higher education (Bean, 2005; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 1993). In spite of a substantial body of knowledge and well-conceived efforts by faculty and student affairs professionals to support student success, college dropout remains a significant puzzle for college educators and national persistence rates do not suggest a significant upswing over the last 20 years (Reason, 2009).

According to Reason (2009), student persistence is a complex, multidimensional issue involving four interrelated spheres, including the student’s precollege characteristics, and three distinct in-college frames of reference: the organizational context, the peer and faculty environment, and individual student experiences. Reason has called for more empirical studies to examine the influences of the organizational context on student persistence. Extant research has most often focused on what students can do to persist while questions about what institutions must do to help students survive and thrive in college remain largely unanswered (Kuh, 2008).

In addition to financial, academic, social, environmental, and institutional factors that influence persistence, Bean (2005) suggested research and practice must pay attention to affective, emotional, and interpersonal aspects that may influence a student’s intent to leave college. Students who develop positive attitudes or emotions towards their institution are more likely to persist and graduate than their peers who do not connect with their college or university on an emotional level.

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Positive emotions can develop from relationships with peers in residence halls, faculty and instructors in the major, or academic and career advisors. Recent branding efforts have targeted socio-emotional attitudes of college students to tie them more strongly to the university community and develop student loyalty to the institution (Vander Schee, 2011).

In the customer service literature, loyalty is defined as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior” (Oliver, as cited in Helgesen, 2008, p. 56). A student’s loyalty to a university is a significant predictor of persistence; yet, few scholars in the higher education literature have studied the concept (Bean, 1982a, 1982b, 1985, 2005), perhaps because of visceral reactions to consumer- or business-related connotations in higher education.

Student affairs practice is mainly grounded in student development theory, which focuses on the holistic growth of college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) and may reject the idea of equating students to customers explaining the customer-is-always-right notion as a pedagogically irresponsible approach to student learning (Bay & Daniel, 2001). However, an alternative argument holds that many of today’s millennial students and their parents already perceive themselves as customers (Levine & Dean, 2012). It makes sense to consider perspectives from disciplines such as marketing, management, or public relations that may further explain the student persistence quagmire, and that point to actionable implications for institutions to better manage and sustain student loyalty, thus aiding persistence.

The present study bridges the gap between Reason’s (2009) call for the study of organizational contexts and features and Bean’s (2005) psychological perspective in persistence research. Student affairs practitioners who recruit and orient students to universities, faculty who work on developing students inside the classroom, and those who serve and guide students in residence life and student activities can directly implement strategies suggested by the results of the present study. Professionals who seek to develop students into alumni who want to remain connected to the institution can use our recommendations about student loyalty management to improve daily practice.

The purpose of this study was to investigate what personal and institutional characteristics or factors best predict and explain the loyalty students express towards their undergraduate institution. Three midsized master’s comprehensive institutions in the same Midwestern state served as the research sites and 1,207 undergraduates completed the Student University Loyalty Instrument (SULI). The following research question guided the inquiry:

What factors predict student loyalty to the university, specifically how do precollege characteristics (e.g., race, gender, first-generation student status), student behaviors or attitudes (e.g., intent to leave, satisfaction, fit), and institutional conditions (e.g., quality of teaching, quality of student services, quality of staff) affect the development of student loyalty?

Related Literature

First, this review of the extant literature outlines a conceptual model of student loyalty grounded in student-university relationship quality. Next, specific predictors of student loyalty including perceived service quality, satisfaction, and commitment are reviewed. Finally, the review features research on the strategy of relationship management in higher education and student affairs practice.

Conceptual Model of Student Loyalty

German researchers (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001—an article in an English
speaking journal; Langer, Ziegele, & Hennig-Thurau, 2001—the original report written in German) advanced the most-cited conceptual model of student loyalty to date. Grounded in constructs of relationship management, the authors coined theirs the Relationship Quality-Based Student Loyalty (RQSL) model (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). In this sense, student loyalty is mainly driven by the institutional dimensions of perceived relationship quality of students with their universities. The original research sampled more than 1,000 individuals who had either withdrawn or graduated from their German universities. In the original study, the strongest predictors of student loyalty were the perceived quality of teaching (path coefficient = .56) along with the emotional commitment (path coefficient = .39) students made to their university. The model accounted for nearly 75% of the variance in student loyalty. Hennig-Thurau and colleagues suggested that student loyalty attitudes and behaviors may strongly correlate with student persistence decisions and behaviors.

Predictors of Student Loyalty

Extant research suggests two kinds of predictors of student loyalty: one emphasizing service quality, the other long-term relationships and the roles that satisfaction and student commitment play in such relationships. Rojas-Mendez, Vasquez-Parraga, Kara, and Cerda-Urrutia (2009) indicated that perceived service quality in educational relationships is people-based and interactions between students and faculty, administrators, and support staff play a significant role in defining how a student feels about an institution. Lin and Tsai (2009) found that perceived quality of teaching was the highest predictor of student loyalty and persistence to the university.

Satisfaction as a construct includes not only approval or liking with products and services but also with organizational aspects such as interactions with employees (Rojas-Mendez et al., 2009). Elliott and Shin (2002) suggested that students draw satisfaction from five institutional attributes: valuable course content, organized registration process, excellent instruction in major, ability to get into classes, and job placement rate of major. In a series of studies Helgesen and Nesset (2007a, 2007b; Nesset & Helgesen, 2009) indicated that student satisfaction affects loyalty approximately three times more than any other factor examined.

Bowden and Wood (2011) examined whether satisfaction, trust, and commitment in the creation of student loyalty to the institution showed meaningful differences between men and women. Despite literature portraying men as task-oriented and women as relationship-oriented, Bowden and Wood found that gender did not influence the importance of the factors that contribute to loyalty. Both men and women largely sought to establish affective and emotional relationships with their institutions’ agents.

Student commitment to their institution is determined by the level of academic and social integration in the institutional fabric (Tinto, 1993). Commitment refers to the fit between the skills, abilities, and values of the student and the values, expectations, and demands of the institution (Rojas-Mendez et al., 2009). Initial student institutional commitment is important to their continuous favorable perception of the university (Braxton et al., 2004). Students who initially commit to their university had favorable perceptions of the university’s focus on the well-being of students and the integrity of the institution.

In Bean’s (1982a) model, institutional commitment comprised the attitudinal variables of loyalty and certainty of choice and attitudinal, rather than organizational (student-faculty contact; peer contact) or environmental variables (family; financing college) were expected to have more direct influences on student intent to leave. In another study Bean (1985) found that educational goals and the utility of one’s education affected commitment positively, while opportunity to transfer to another institution affected commitment negatively. Bean (2005) defined institutional commitment
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as the degree of student attachment compared to a specific institution compared to postsecondary education in general: “It parallels the common sense notion of loyalty or, as the Beach Boys would say, ‘Be true to your school’” (p. 220). Bean (2005) concluded that college educators must consider how the delivery of student services helps students develop a favorable attitude toward the institution and their own continued enrollment. The next section will review the literature on some of the strategies for developing this favorable attitude of students towards their institution.

Student Relationship Management

The term “relationship management” emerged from the literatures of public relations, marketing, management, and communications. In higher education this term has not often resonated with scholars (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007–08) perhaps because of the hesitation of educators to consider college students as customers. The objectives in relationship management are to build ties with existing customers with the intent of retaining them. Relationship management is based on the assumption that retaining current customers is more cost effective than to recruit new ones (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007–08). Relationship management implies more than a simple buyer-seller relationship in that it provides a concern for cooperative and collaborative relationships between the firm and its customers. This relationship directly relates to the learning partnerships concept in higher education in which a facilitator of information (most likely a faculty member or administrator) partners with a learner (most likely a student) by integrating and sharing responsibility for learning.

To relate relationship management to higher education, Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007–08) coined the term “student relationship management” (SRM) implying recruitment and retention of quality students. This relationship involves a life cycle that starts with the recruitment of students by admissions professionals, develops during student enrollment through relationships with faculty and staff, and refocuses after graduation with the help of alumni affairs professionals. Relationship management is based on getting close to students (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007–08)—that is, knowing who they are, creating lasting interpersonal relationships with them, inviting their input early and often, and communicating with them frequently. Ackerman and Schibrowsky suggested that institutions of higher education need to personalize their relationships with their students: “It seems odd that customers who have online accounts with Amazon . . . are greeted by name each time they access the site, but students who use the college library, campus food service, [or the] financial aid office . . . are seldom greeted by name” (p. 318). Failing to show interest in favorable student-university relationships communicates to students that college educators do not know students or may not care about them, not a basis on which student loyalty rests.

Methods

This study aimed to investigate how student precollege characteristics, behaviors or attitudes, or institutional conditions predicted student loyalty to their university. This section presents the instrument, characterizes the sample, and outlines steps for data collection and analysis.

Instrument

The researchers adapted an 86-item instrument from the existing RQSL model (Langer et al., 2001) to create the SULI. After gaining permission from Markus Langer to adapt the survey, items were translated from the original German version to be used for the SULI using idiomatic and culturally relevant terms so they would make sense to American college students.

The original authors (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Langer et al., 2001) established the construct validity of the RQSL survey items through a process involving exploratory principal components
analysis followed by confirmatory factor analysis. Related to content validity, the original authors drew on extant literature to create each RQSL scale. In creating the SULI, the investigators of the present study used the original efforts to establish validity. The nature of each subscale’s items was reviewed to ensure they covered the domain of possible items related to the concepts measured. For example, in the quality of student services subscale the authors ensured that the original RQSL survey was kept intact but that each major unit or service in U.S. universities was represented (e.g., “My university provides high-quality academic advising, career advising, study abroad opportunities, financial aid advising, and student health services.”).

In keeping with the original study, 10 of the SULI scales were based on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree). The frequency of student engagement domain was the only SULI scale that measured frequency (Never; Once/Semester; Once/Month; Twice/Month; Once/Week; More than Once a Week). The items in each subscale were summed to create individual subscale scores to use in additional analyses. The researchers reverse coded all of the negatively worded items before summing scale scores and analyzing for reliability. Table 1 shows the 11 scale names, number of items in each scale, a sample item, and the α level for a measure of internal consistency reliability of each SULI scale.

In addition to the scales, the SULI included demographic items to assess respondent classification, gender, age, race, international student status, how respondents ranked their current institution among alternative choices prior to enrolling, parental education, and driving time from the institution to the students’ home.

### Data Collection

In November 2011 the researchers administered the SULI to a random sample of 7,500 undergraduate students enrolled at three different master’s comprehensive public universities. At that point, total combined enrollment amounted to slightly more than 26,000 undergraduate students, including nearly 1,900 non-White students (approximately 7%) and 56% women. Combined data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Name</th>
<th># of Items</th>
<th>Sample Item</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Instructors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>My instructors are prepared for class</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Staff</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Staff at my university are honest</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Student Services</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>My university provides high-quality career advising</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Facilities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>My university provides high-quality residence halls</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Skill Development</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>My university helps me figure out who I am as a person</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freq. of Student Engagement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>I participate in academic activities offered by my university</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Impressions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>The university offered academic programs I was interested in</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Fit</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I feel like I belong here</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I have had a positive experience at my university</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to Leave</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>I intend to transfer to another university within 6 months</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Loyalty</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>I am proud to be a student at my university</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

*SULI Scales, Number of Items, Sample Items, and Internal Consistency*
from the three institutions showed average retention rates to the sophomore year of 82% and average 6-year graduation rates of 63%.

After securing IRB approval at all institutions the researchers used a secure online Qualtrics® site to administer the survey. Students who fully completed the survey within 48 hours of its launch were included in a random drawing of fifteen $20 gift cards as an incentive to participate.

Sample

Respondents were 1,207 traditionally aged undergraduates who fully completed the SULI (16% response rate). The sample consisted primarily of young (mean age = 20.9 years), White, and female students with equivalent numbers of students across all classification levels (Table 2). Fourteen students (1.2%) self-identified as international students. Two fifths (42%) of respondents were the first in their families to attend college, and nine of ten respondents lived within a 4-hour drive from their respective campuses. The sample overrepresented women compared to the combined enrollment statistics of the three institutions. Students of Color in the sample were representative of the enrollment numbers at the research sites.

Table 2

Respondent Classification, Sex, and Race (n = 1,207)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Year</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to indicate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,071</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to indicate</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

The researchers calculated descriptive statistics for all SULI subscales and all demographic variables. The researchers then conducted a multiple regression analysis to identify if and to what
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extent the institutional conditions (quality of facilities, quality of teaching, quality of student services, quality of staff), student behaviors and attitudes (frequency of student engagement, intent to leave, satisfaction, institutional fit, initial impressions, and perceived skill development), and the student precollege characteristics (rank of the student’s college choice, mother’s education, father’s education, gender, race, first-generation status, international student status, class level, and driving distance from home) predict student loyalty. Three different regression models using the standard enter method attempted to measure the effect of the three predictor clusters. The first model included all three clusters. Next, the researchers removed institutional conditions to form the second model and, lastly, institutional conditions and student behaviors/attitudes to form the third model. For coding purposes, the researchers dummy coded variables of race, gender, and international student status.

Finally, to further investigate the impact of student’s rank of their college choice, the researchers used ANOVA to identify differences in student loyalty depending on whether students attended their first, second, or lower college choice as well as to analyze college choice and respondents’ intent to leave subscale scores.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. While the remainder of the subscales demonstrated reliability indices above 0.70, two scales (Frequency of Student Engagement, $\alpha = .67$; Institutional Fit, $\alpha = .68$) fell below this level and any findings related to those scales must be interpreted cautiously. Aiken (2003) suggested reliability coefficients of .60 to .70 are satisfactory in research. The authors used this range as the threshold for reliability for the current study.

Second, the research sites were three similar institutions in the same state system of higher education and generalizability to other institutional contexts is limited. Next, the sample was skewed by respondents who, by a large majority, were not interested in leaving their institutions. More varied samples are needed to indicate different shades of loyalty and its effects on intent to leave and persistence. At the same time, the students who completed the SULI are likely more loyal than their counterparts who did not complete the instrument. Perhaps identifying and incentivizing students who seem reticent to participate in research may attract a more varied sample to the study of loyalty. Likewise, conducting the study in more racially diverse institutional contexts would allow more conclusive inferences about the predictive ability of race in student loyalty.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 3 shows the summed mean scores of all SULI domains revealing the highest mean in the quality of student services scale. The vast majority of respondents (93%) indicated they were not interested in transferring, withdrawing, or in dropping out of college altogether. Correspondingly, the mean score for intent to leave was the lowest of all subscales.

Examining the frequencies of the loyalty domain item by item shows students felt somewhat (4 = “somewhat agree” on the 6-point scale) loyal to their institution; however, several of these items imply room for improvement. For instance, 10% of the sample disagreed with the statement, “I care about my university,” the first item of the loyalty subscale. Nearly one fifth of respondents ($n = 229$) would not choose their university again if they had a chance. The final two items revealed nearly one third of respondents were not interested in remaining connected with the university after graduation, and 57% ($n = 686$) did not plan on contributing financially to their alma mater at some point in the future.
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The multiple regression analyses indicated that the full prediction model including student college attitudes and behaviors, along with precollege characteristics and institutional conditions explained $69\%$ of the variance in loyalty scores ($R^2 = .691$, $F (18, 1109) = 137.947$, $p < .001$). Specifically, seven SULI subscales and three demographic variables were statistically significant predictors of student loyalty (Table 4). In the first model, the precollege variable sex had the highest positive regression coefficient, while the attitudinal and behavioral variable intent to leave had the highest negative coefficient. For this sample, sex was a significant predictor of loyalty; being female indicated a positive increase in loyalty scores. Race was associated with a higher loyalty score; however, caution is necessary when interpreting this result because of the low number of Students of Color ($n = 90$) in the sample. Further, college choice rank was a statistically significant predictor of student loyalty. All of the six attitudinal and behavioral SULI subscales predicted loyalty at statistically significant levels. Satisfaction was the strongest positive predictor and intent to leave the strongest negative predictor. Only one of the institutional conditions subscales (Quality of Teaching) predicted loyalty at statistically significant levels.

Removal of the institutional condition variables in the second model did not significantly change the prediction of the variance in student loyalty (Model 2 $R^2 = .689$, $\Delta R^2 = .002$, $F$-change (4, 1109) = 2.153, $p > .05$) indicating that institutional conditions contribute little the prediction of loyalty. The pattern of significance across specific predictors did not change greatly as the same three precollege student characteristics (sex, race, college choice rank) and six student behaviors and attitudes that were significant in the first model remained significant in Model 2 with similar weights. International student status became a statistically significant predictor; being an international student was indicative of greater increases in loyalty scores.

Table 3

SULI Subscale Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges ($n = 1,207$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Summed Mean</th>
<th>Adjusted Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Teaching</td>
<td>39.90</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Staff</td>
<td>35.18</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Student Services</td>
<td>35.63</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Facilities</td>
<td>14.37</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Skill Develop</td>
<td>35.50</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Student Engagement</td>
<td>20.64</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Impressions</td>
<td>45.35</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Fit</td>
<td>17.54</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>16.58</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to Leave</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Loyalty</td>
<td>36.45</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>7.70</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree for all but Frequency of Student Engagement (1 = Never, 6 = More than once a week)
Predictors of Student Loyalty

Removing the student attitudes and behaviors variables from the regression in the third model resulted in a significant change in the amount of variance predicted (Model 3 $R^2 = .119, \Delta R^2 = -.570, F$-change (6, 1113) = 339.635, $p < .001$) indicating that critical predictors were within this cluster. The greatest amount of variance in student loyalty appears attributable to student attitude and behaviors variables. The researchers found no indications of multicollinearity after reviewing the tolerance and variance inflation factor values across all predictors for each model.

Table 4

Regression Coefficients for Three Models Predicting Student Loyalty ($n = 1,207$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clusters</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precollege Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Choice Rank</td>
<td>.509**</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.507**</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>1.843**</td>
<td>.175</td>
<td>.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Student</td>
<td>2.627</td>
<td>1.355</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>2.686*</td>
<td>1.354</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>1.813</td>
<td>2.240</td>
<td>.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-1.589*</td>
<td>.544</td>
<td>-.053</td>
<td>-1.631*</td>
<td>.542</td>
<td>-.055</td>
<td>-1.348</td>
<td>.902</td>
<td>-.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.703*</td>
<td>.296</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.796*</td>
<td>.294</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.875</td>
<td>.490</td>
<td>.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's Education</td>
<td>-1.66</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>-.038</td>
<td>-1.167</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>-.038</td>
<td>-.214</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>-.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's Education</td>
<td>-1.106</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>-1.106</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>-.023</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from Home</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.185</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.031</td>
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Notes: Dependent Variable = Loyalty, Model 1 $R^2 = .691 \Delta R^2 = .691**$, Model 2 $R^2 = .689 \Delta R^2 = -.002$, Model 3 $R^2 = .119, \Delta R^2 = -.570**$

* = $p \leq .05$, ** = $p \leq .001$
Predictors of Student Loyalty

College Choice Rank, Loyalty, and Intent to Leave

The SULI survey item used to determine student-college choice was, “In what rank was this university on your list of possible choices before you enrolled?” Options included “1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th or lower” and “it was not on my list.” An average of 88% of the sample ranked their current institution either 1st or 2nd among alternatives. An ANOVA analyzing differences in loyalty scores across groups of students based on rank of their current institution indicated significant differences \((F(5, 1197) = 22.71, p \leq .001)\). Post hoc t-tests demonstrated that students who ranked their institution first among alternatives had statistically significant higher loyalty scores than students who ranked their institution second or third. The effect size for this analysis was found to be \(\eta^2 = .104\), indicating a medium to large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

An ANOVA also showed a statistically significant differences between college choice and intent to leave \((F(5, 1197) = 7.65, p \leq .001)\); students who ranked their current institution first had significantly lower intent to leave than counterparts who ranked their institution second or third. The effect size for this analysis was found to be \(\eta^2 = .031\), suggesting a small to medium effect size (Cohen, 1988).

Discussion

Results indicate three definitive conclusions about the respondents in this study. First, gender matters in predicting student loyalty. In fact, gender was the only statistically significant and conclusive demographic predictor of loyalty, with women being more loyal to their institution than men. This refutes findings by Bowden and Wood (2011) who suggested that gender did not affect how students perceived their development of institutional loyalty. College men are capable of developing loyalty, but student affairs professionals and faculty should be aware that it may take more work to create and develop institutional loyalty in men than in women.

Second, student behavioral and attitudinal variables predict loyalty at higher levels than variables of institutional conditions or precollege variables. For example, satisfaction, fit, and intent to leave more strongly predicted loyalty than quality of teaching, the only institutional variable with significant predictive ability in the regression model. The high predictive ability of student satisfaction, fit, and intent to leave is consistent with extant studies on student loyalty (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Helgesen, 2008; Helgesen & Nesset, 2007a; Lin & Tsai, 2009; Rojas-Mendez et al., 2009). Intent to leave was a significant negative predictor of student loyalty, confirming Bean’s (1982a, 1985) conclusions on the inverse relationship between student loyalty and intent to leave.

Perceived quality of teaching deserves further exploration because it was the only institutional condition variable that predicted student loyalty; however, the negative Beta weight suggests an inverse relationship. That is, as student perceptions of the quality of teaching increase, loyalty decreases. This finding is counterintuitive and refutes extant research (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Langer et al., 2001; Lin & Tsai, 2009) suggesting perceived quality of teaching is the main positive predictor of student loyalty. Perhaps different institutional or cultural differences between international and U.S. institutions help explain these findings further. In German higher education specifically, teaching is the only salient source of interaction between students and the university as U.S.-modeled student services are largely inexistent. In the United States, engagement in activities other than academics often dominates student life—indicating quality of teaching may play a lesser, even negative role in predicting loyalty.

Finally, the present study points to a definitive conclusion about the salience of the college choice rank variable in relation to loyalty and intent to leave. The strong predictive ability of college
choice confirms Braxton et al.'s (2004) findings about initial student commitment. How highly a prospective student ranks an institution before enrolling depends on several factors, chief among them initial impressions. If students’ initial commitment to the institution is strong, it will foster their continuous favorable perceptions of the university and their loyalty. Similarly, students who initially ranked their institution first among other choices also showed significantly lower intent to leave than counterparts who ranked the institution lower. This is consistent with Bean (1982b), who found that loyalty and certainty of choice predicted intent to leave more than other variables. Little research on how students rank prospective institutions exists, specifically relative to the development of student loyalty or intent to leave. This not only signals that more research about this relationship is necessary, but also that college educators should explore specific strategies to help students learn to appreciate their current institution, even though it may have ranked lower prior to enrollment.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of the present study have several implications for student affairs practitioners and faculty committed to college student success and persistence.

Ties that Bind—Create Student-Institution Bonds

The extent to which students are satisfied with their college experience and express fit, sense of belonging, and connection to their institution predict loyalty at higher levels than any institutional or precollege variables. This gives rise to the importance of studying and improving the conditions that enhance the student-university relationship and student loyalty. Student loyalty thrives in environments where specific curricular, cocurricular, or service-related steps are taken to communicate to students that the institution deeply cares about each student, and that it is committed to student learning, skill development, and satisfaction. Such environments can be created by using simple bonding strategies, such as social and structural bonds (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007–08).

Social bonds start with relationship-building strategies such as calling students by name. We call this the “Cheers Effect” with which institutions pledge to become a place where everybody knows student names. For instance, the magnetic stripe on student ID cards can be programmed so that dining, library, and recreational staff can easily identify and use student names in daily interactions, even at large institutions. Faculty and student affairs professionals must be committed to calling students by name as much as possible. Research (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007–08; Vianden, 2009) supports the positive effects of student name use in- and outside of the classroom, underscoring the importance of the Cheers Effect. Satisfaction, fit, and loyalty will increase when students perceive receiving personalized attention from all personnel, including administrative and professional staff.

Additional effective social bonding activities for students include informal conversations with deans and presidents; student awards and celebration activities; personalized communication (avoiding the “Dear Student” salutation); and social media, e-mail, or text messaging for student achievements. Several renowned senior student affairs officers already engage in this open praising or recognition of students on twitter (e.g., Lori Berquam at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Kenneth Elmore at Boston University, and Lisa Erwin at the University of Minnesota-Duluth). Beyond creating large student followings, these strategies likely bind the student to the institution where staff express care, appreciation, and celebration of individual student accomplishments.
Aside from social bonding strategies, Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007–08) suggested the use of structural bonding activities, which are most effective yet most difficult to achieve in SRM. Such activities include offering individualized major programs, honors courses, or valuable alumni network activities that start during enrollment. In addition, students need to be given a voice on campus and participate in university committees (e.g., standing, strategic planning, selection) or staff evaluations, such as 360° assessments of leading student and academic affairs administrators. Similar bonds with students could be created by allowing undergraduate students anonymous input in faculty promotion and tenure decisions.

Faculty should be encouraged and incentivized to create a sense of belonging and community among students in their classrooms, labs, and studios. This includes spending considerable amounts of course time on student-peer introductions, meaningful collaborative activities during the semester, and displaying positive instructor behavior to suggest approachability, availability, support, and care of students. The only thing all college students have in common is the classroom, and that is where community building must begin. Student affairs practitioners are well-positioned to assist faculty in this endeavor to reach students who do not spend time on campus beyond attending class. Further, when interacting with students, student affairs practitioners must put more emphasis on student course- or major-related questions and guidance.

Finally, faculty and administrators, specifically alumni affairs professionals, can use the findings from this study to improve current practices. Many students (up to two-thirds in the present study) showed little interest in maintaining connections with their institution or in contributing financially to it at some point in the future. Students would benefit from communication instructing what it means to be alumni of an institution, associated benefits, and how to best remain connected and give back to the institution. Students likely perceive this to only include financial contributions, and college educators must do better informing students on other ways to contribute to their alma maters.

The Right Fit?—Make Initial Impressions Count

The significant predictive ability of college choice rank and the initial impressions subscale of student loyalty should encourage university staff in admissions, orientation, residence life, records and registration, academic advising, first-year experience programs, as well as faculty to focus on creating the best possible, data-driven admissions and orientation processes. If students rank their institution low that means they would have rather attended other institutions and may have their initial allegiances elsewhere, likely an early risk indicator for attrition. If enrollment management officials and other educators do not find ways to assure students the current institution may be the right fit after all, the development of the students’ loyalty may lag far behind optimal levels, bringing about other risk indicators such as lack of fit, dissatisfaction, or intent to leave.

To combat risk of attrition, institutions should assess how all first-year students ranked their current institution among alternatives after they have enrolled, such as during summer orientation or after enrollment. Conducting this assessment during the admissions process is not advisable as students may inflate the ranking in hopes of gaining admission. After the assessment, those students who rank the institution lower than their top two choices could be identified to faculty and student affairs administrators as potentially at risk for attrition, they could be tracked, mentored, advised, and engaged on campus to perhaps compensate their initial resignation to attend a less favorable institution. The University of South Florida, for instance, employs a model to predict risk of attrition for high-risk first-year students. Students are identified to advisors, faculty, and residential staff before the semester for appropriate intervention and the results have been significant (T. Miller, personal communication, May 21, 2013).
Predictors of Student Loyalty

Student loyalty, persistence, and success hinge on a complex interplay of psychological and organizational variables. Without hesitation, students should be able to identify how their institution commits to individual student learning, satisfaction, fit, skill development, as well as to creating and maintaining personable student-university relationships. Colleges and universities who engage in suggested SRM practices will not only see increases in student loyalty but likely also in institutional persistence and graduation rates by several points, as well as in the development of alumni who give back to the institution in a variety of ways.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study has strong implications for loyalty and SRM; however, more research is necessary, specifically since loyalty is an understudied concept in U.S. higher education and student affairs research. The original study (Langer et al., 2001) sampled German individuals who had either left or graduated from their institutions. For the present study the researchers only sampled from current university students. Further research in the United States is necessary with students who transferred, withdrew, stopped or dropped out to see variations of student loyalty and its effects on student persistence. Research with larger samples from a larger variety of institutions is needed to explore the relationship between student loyalty and actual leaving behaviors, such as transferring, withdrawing, or dropping out.

In addition to survey studies, qualitative research should explore loyalty from a constructivist perspective, especially due to its significant socio-emotional predictors. In-depth interviews or focus groups studies could illuminate the concept of student loyalty and provide rich data about lived experiences of student loyalty development.

Conclusion

Student persistence is arguably the most important goal for institutions of higher education in the United States. Persistence manifests as a complex issue with several dimensions related to college students and their precollege characteristics, attitudes and behaviors, as well as institutional conditions. In the present study, the most important determinants of student loyalty to the institution included student attitudinal and behavioral variables, followed by institutional condition variables and variables of respondents’ precollege characteristics. The main demographic factor predicting loyalty was sex, suggesting women in this sample were more loyal to their institution than men.

Results indicate that institutions need to pay attention to the relationships they create with undergraduate students and what curricular and cocurricular programs and services the institution should provide to increase student loyalty. The results hold significant implications for teaching and student affairs practice, including social and structural bonding strategies, such as using student names, creating community in classrooms, celebrating student accomplishments through social media, as well as involving students in institutional decision making. In addition, college educators need to make student initial impressions count and determine where the institution ranked for students prior to enrollment, and low rankings ought to be considered early risk indicators for student intent to leave.

References

Predictors of Student Loyalty


