



## REL Pacific Ask A REL Response

College and Career Readiness  
February 2015

### Question:

**What are the major reasons for college-level student dropout in contexts similar to the RMI?**

### Response:

The following document is a response to an Ask-a-REL inquiry from an alliance member from the College of the Marshall Islands. The college is seeking to understand factors that might contribute to their dropout rates. In particular, the alliance member expressed interest in how economic opportunity in the Marshall Islands might relate to persistence in college. In response to this inquiry, REL Pacific has gathered literature and online resources.

As a first step in providing the requested information, REL Pacific reviewed information in the QuestionPoint database—a database of existing Ask-A-REL responses across all ten REL regions—regarding causes for dropout from post-secondary institutions. Additional sources were identified through a web-based search. Search terms and selection criteria for the resources are included in Methods.

Descriptions of the resources are quoted from the publication abstract (Abstract) or the publication itself (Introduction or Excerpt). An abstract is always used when available. However, if additional text in the resource provides important information not contained in the author's abstract, the additional information is also provided.

### Research References

Goldrick-Rab, S. (2010). Challenges and opportunities for improving community college student success. *Review of Educational Research*, 80, 437-469. Doi:10.3102/0034654310370163. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0034654310370163?journalCode=era>

*From the abstract:* Many of the democratizing opportunities provided by community colleges are diminished in the eyes of policy makers by inadequate rates of success. In particular, large proportions of students who enter community colleges do not persist for longer than a semester, complete a program, or attain a credential. This review critically

examines academic and policy research in search of explanations, emphasizing what is known about challenges stemming from three levels of influence: the macro-level opportunity structure; institutional practices; and the social, economic, and academic attributes students bring to college. It provides examples of how factors operating at each level affect rates of success at key times, including the initial transition to college, the experience of remedial education, and persistence through credit-bearing coursework. The article also discusses potential and ongoing reforms that could increase rates of community college success by addressing one or more areas of influence (the macro, the institutional, or the individual). It is concluded that increasing success in the open-access, public 2-year sector requires reforms directed at multiple levels and cannot be achieved with either student- or institution-focused incentives alone.

*From the excerpt p. 448:* Some of the strongest evidence that institutional practices regarding academic coursework affect student success comes from two studies indicating that certain courses act as “gatekeepers” to college completion (Calcagno et al., 2006; Roksa, Jenkins, Jaggars, Zeidenberg, & Cho, 2009). Passing gatekeeper math and writing courses enables access to higher level coursework, significantly contributing to student progress. That relationship appears to hold even after accounting for differences in students taking and not taking gatekeeper courses. For example, a study in Florida found that among comparable students in remedial writing courses, those who passed the first-year composition course were more than twice as likely to graduate when compared with those who did not pass that course (Calcagno et al., 2006). A study of Virginia community college students showed that gatekeeper courses appear to offer similar benefits in that state (Roksa et al., 2009). And yet many students fail to take any gatekeeper courses at all.

*From the excerpt p. 450:* By virtue of their extensive course catalogues and numerous services, coupled with the diverse array of students they serve, community colleges provide ample opportunities but—according to some—insufficient information with which to guide students through choosing among opportunities. As a result of substantial informational requirements accompanied by too little advising, some students may take courses they do not need, spend a longer period of time in coursework that financial aid will not fund, and eventually drop out (Grubb, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). For example, many community college students have little knowledge about course requirements and in some cases are not even aware that the classes they are taking are remedial and do not count toward a degree (Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006). This makes academic advising important to students’ chances of success; one study finds that this is especially true for students with academic deficiencies (Bahr, 2008). When community colleges do not explicitly provide the information and social skills their students need, students face obstacles in finishing college and moving into the labor force (Deil-Amen, 2006).

*REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a free link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.*

Guillory, R. M. (2009). American Indian/Alaska native college student retention strategies. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 33(2), 12-14, 16, 18, 20-21, 38. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ897631>

*From the abstract:* This article presents findings from a qualitative study examining the similarities and differences between American Indian/Alaska Native student perceptions and the perceptions of state representatives, university presidents, and faculty about persistence factors and barriers to degree completion specific to American Indian/Alaska Native students at three land-grant universities across Washington, Idaho, and Montana. A comparative analysis of themes emerging from interview data reveals conflicting perceptions among participant cohorts. Retention-to-graduation strategies are offered for institutions of higher education desiring to better serve these students and their respective tribal communities. The strategies offered, including specialized forms of culturally sensitive career and academic counseling, peer mentoring, and Supplemental Instruction, can also help professionals delivering developmental education programming better serve this student population.

*From the excerpt p. 18:* From the institutional perspective, financial support drives or motivates AI/AN to persist through college completion. On the other hand, although a few AI/AN students in the study stated that sufficient financial support did help, they did not perceive adequate funding to be a principal persistence factor. Instead, it was viewed as a barrier because there never seemed to be enough money for childcare (for the single mothers in the study), tuition, or rent. One student mentioned: "If you've lost your scholarship and you don't have the drive or the willingness to work yourself and pay for it yourself, you're not gonna go back to school." Students did agree with institution representatives that the lack of money was pervasive, but they simply did not see it as the most daunting barrier to overcome.

In contrast, AI/AN students suggested that family and giving back to tribal community provides the determination and desire to finish. One student commented: "I'm the first in my family to go to college and so it will mean a lot to my family and me if I can graduate and become a teacher."

*From the excerpt p. 18:* Distinctively, students suggested that social support on campus was critical to their persistence. For example, the Native American or Multicultural Student Centers on each campus provided the "community" the students deemed essential in reducing their sense of isolation and alienation. Social support from the institution countered the negative effects of leaving home and the feelings of isolation that many of the Native American students experienced during their stay at the university. "What has helped me as a transfer student is having this Native American Student Center. It makes you feel like you're at home when you're around more native people," said one Indian student. The Indian reservations these students come from are often isolated with very few non-Indians, so to have enclaves or gathering places where students can socialize and feel a part of a university (although not a part of mainstream campus life) was vital to the growth and resiliency of these students. This particular retention factor was not mentioned or addressed by the institutional representatives.

*From the excerpt p. 18:* Interestingly, AI/AN students and institution representatives did agree that lack of academic preparation at the K- 12 level caused, in some instances, severe barriers. Out of frustration, one Indian student exclaimed: "I think our education is getting a lot better on the reservation, but I really don't feel like I was prepared." Similarly, a state representative claimed: "Frankly, some of the [Indian] reservation K-12 schools are not as good a quality as we enjoy at other places." One faculty member suggested that the problems AI/AN students face result from poor preparation in math and writing [at the K-12 level]; and this could come for a variety of reasons. Maybe the students and their high schools weren't preparing them for college. Maybe they've been out of school for a while and so their skills are kinda [sic] rusty. Maybe academics and education wasn't emphasized enough in their family or in their community so that they really [are not] valued highly.

Lotkowski, V. A., Robbins, S. B., & Noeth, R. J. (2004). *The role of academic and non-academic factors in improving college retention*. ACT policy report. Iowa City, IA: ACT, Inc. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED485476>

*From the abstract:* This report provides information from a major technical study about the influence of non-academic factors, alone and combined with academic factors, on student retention and performance at four-year colleges and universities. A meta-analysis technique was used to identify the non-academic factors that had the most salient relationship to postsecondary retention. The extent to which each factor predicted postsecondary retention was also identified. Nine broad categories of non-academic factors were constructed to both structure the analysis and report the findings. Findings indicate that the non-academic factors of academic-related skills, academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, social support, certain contextual influences (institutional selectivity and financial support), and social involvement all had a positive relationship to retention. The academic factors of high school grade point average (HSGPA) and ACT Assessment scores, and socioeconomic status (SES) had a positive relationship to college retention, the strongest being HSGPA, followed by SES and ACT Assessment scores. The overall relationship to college retention was strongest when SES, HSGPA, and ACT Assessment scores were combined with institutional commitment, academic goals, social support, academic self-confidence, and social involvement. In terms of performance, the findings indicate that of the non-academic factors, academic self-confidence and achievement motivation had the strongest relationship to college GPA. Of the academic factors, both HSGPA and ACT Assessment scores had a stronger relationship to GPA than did SES, the strongest being HSGPA followed by ACT Assessment scores and SES. The overall relationship to college performance was strongest when ACT Assessment scores, HSGPA, and SES were combined with academic self-confidence and achievement motivation. Recommendations include the implementation of formal retention programs that consider the academic, social, and emotional needs of students.

Makuakane-Drechsel, T., & Hagedorn, L. S. (2000). Correlates of retention among Asian Pacific Americans in community colleges: The case for Hawaiian students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(8), 639-655. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10668920050140800> .

*From the abstract:* This study examined Hawaiian students' persistence at the four community colleges on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. The research covered a five-year period (10 semesters), fall 1991 —spring 1996, and focused on factors promoting persistence for students pursuing either liberal arts or vocational-technical degrees. Logistic regression was the statistical method used, and the analyses were performed separately for the two groups of students. The results indicated that four factors—cumulative grade point average, financial aid, average credit hours, and enrollment at Campus 4—were significant for both liberal arts and vocational-technical majors, whereas another two variables—reverse transfer and attending an urban high school — were significant for liberal arts students only. Recommendations for policies, programs, and strategies to promote persistence for Hawaiian students were based on those results.

*From the excerpt pp. 650–651:* Four independent variables were significant for vocational–technical students. The estimate of the change in the probability revealed that for every hour of credit enrolled, the probability of persistence increased by 2.7%. For every one full grade point increase in cumulative GPA, the chance of persistence increased by 19.3%. Students receiving financial assistance increased their probability of persisting by 24.9% over students who did not receive assistance. Finally, vocational–technical students attending Campus 4 decreased their likelihood of persistence 20.2% over vocational–technical students at the reference campus.

In their order of predictive ability, the six significant variables predicting persistence of liberal arts students were (a) cumulative GPA, (b) receipt of financial aid, (c) average credit hours, (d) enrollment at Campus 4, (e) previous four-year institution experience, and (f) location of high school. For vocational–technical students, the relative order of predictive ability was (a) cumulative GPA, (b) receipt of financial aid, (c) average credit hours, and (d) attendance at Campus 4. For vocational–technical students, attending Campus 4 had a negative effect on persistence, whereas for liberal arts students, the effect was positive.

*REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a free link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.*

Nakajima, M. A., Dembo, M. H., & Mossler, R. (2012). Student persistence in community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(8), 591-613. DOI: 10.1080/10668920903054931. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?q=persistence+in+college&id=EJ971700>

*From the abstract:* The current study extends the research on student persistence in community colleges by investigating factors likely to influence a student's decision to drop out or stay in school. Specifically, this study examined demographic, financial, academic, academic integration, and psychosocial variables and their relationship to student persistence. A sample of 427 community college students completed a 63-item survey assessing psychosocial variables (i.e., self-efficacy and goals) the academic integration variable (i.e., student-faculty interaction), and a number of background variables (i.e., demographic, financial, and academic). In addition, student retention was measured through college

enrollment the following semester. Results of the study revealed that age, work hours, and financial aid influenced student persistence, but the effects diminished once multiple variables were entered into the analysis. Among all the variables, cumulative GPA was the strongest predicting variable for student persistence. Students who had higher cumulative GPAs were twice as likely to stay in college. In addition to cumulative GPA, both enrollment units and English proficiency were predicting factors. However, contrary to expectations, none of the academic integration or psychosocial variables was predictors of student persistence. Nonetheless, the study also revealed that almost all of the variables interrelate with one another. Both goals and self-efficacy were significantly correlated with cumulative GPA, which, in turn, predicted student persistence. Faculty-student interaction was also significantly correlated with enrollment units, which, in turn, predicted student persistence. Therefore, the results indicated the importance of investigating multiple factors in the effort to solve the problem of student persistence in community college.

*From the excerpt pp. 606–607:* Although the career goals did not show significant relationship with student persistence, it is still assumed to be an essential factor of student persistence. It is important to note that although career goals did not have a direct relationship with student persistence, it was significantly correlated with cumulative GPA, which was the strongest predictor of student persistence. It seems sensible that students who had career goals and knew how to achieve them would put in increased effort into their studies, thus increasing their cumulative GPA. This assumption corresponds with past research that showed a relationship between goals/aspirations and performance (e.g., Emerick, 1992; Ting, 1997). In addition to having goals, career decision-making was also considered to be important in one's achievement (e.g., Creed, Prindeaux, & Patton, 2005, Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007). Career decision making was a predictor of students' GPA later in their academic years. It is assumed that students regulate their behaviors in ways they [*sic*] would enable them to achieve their goals once they have set goals/aspirations or decided on their career (McGregor & Elliot, 2002). Therefore, it can be assumed that the presence of career goals will improve one's GPA, and thus increase retention.

*REL Pacific at McREL was unable to locate a free link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific at McREL tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, it was determined that this resource may be of interest. It may be found through university or public library systems.*

Sparks, P.J., & Nuñez, A. (2014). The role of postsecondary institutional urbanicity in college persistence. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 29(6), 1-19. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/29-6.pdf>

*From the abstract:* Students from rural areas are less likely than their urban or suburban counterparts to attend college (Adelman, 2002; Hu, 2003). Although theorists have postulated that institutional urbanicity directly affects college student outcomes (Berger & Milem, 2000), few, if any empirical studies have examined the relationship between an institution's urbanicity and the outcome of individual student persistence. This study employs multilevel modeling to examine the effect of attending a rural institution on individual student persistence. We find persistence does not differ by residential location; however, student level characteristics vary greatly by the location of the four-year institution attended.

Additionally, several of the institutional level characteristics, including other structural, peer, and financial organizational factors, as well as local economic conditions, have an independent effect on individual student persistence. These characteristics vary significantly depending on if the institution is located in a rural, suburban, or urban location.

*From the excerpt p. 12:* Several of the institutional level characteristics warrant more discussion. Future research should explore whether the location of an institution attended has an affect over a students' [*sic*] entire postsecondary career to influence persistence at multiple time points. Additionally, it would be helpful to know if students attending these institutions are from similar residential locations and how this relationship might influence student persistence and ultimate degree completion. Future studies should also examine the relationship between institutional location and other outcomes related to student success and completion, particularly outcomes related to social or community service involvement, such as types of engagement that seem more prevalent among students in rural institutions and how these activities lead to degree completion.

In addressing the role of another aspect of institutional location—local economic conditions—in our model, we found that a higher average unemployment rate is associated with higher persistence odds. This result supports the warehouse hypothesis (Bozick, 2009), which posits that favorable economic conditions pull youth into the labor market and discourage enrollment in college (Grubb & Lazerson, 1982; Shanahan, Miech, & Elder, 1998; Walters, 1984). Conversely, poor local economic conditions (including a high unemployment rate) encourage students to continue high school or postsecondary enrollment (Bozick, 2009). Moreover, while local labor conditions likely have an influence on a student's decision to enroll and persist, students must also consider the opportunity costs associated with translating a college degree into gainful employment upon completion of the degree (Kienzl, Alfonso, & Melguizo, 2007). Because these opportunity costs are likely to vary in different residential settings, more research is warranted to investigate how local labor conditions influence college persistence for students in rural, urban, and suburban settings. If policy makers are interested in increasing postsecondary educational attainment among adults in a particular region, they might consider local labor conditions as an additional influence on student postsecondary persistence (Groen, 2011).

Stewart, A., & Abbott-Chapman, J. (2011). Remote island students' post-compulsory retention: Emplacement and displacement as factors influencing educational persistence or discontinuation. *Journal of Research in Rural Education (Online)*, 26(6), 1-16. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/26-6.pdf>

*From the abstract:* Through ethnographic research using grounded theory we examined social, cultural and locational factors which result in low post-compulsory retention rates of remote island students. The research, conducted by an island "insider," followed a cohort of Australian students from Year 10 in a small island school off the coast of Tasmania to Year 11 in a secondary college on the Tasmanian mainland. The research investigated factors, identified by the students, that influenced their transition from Year 10, the final year of compulsory schooling, through Years 11 and 12, and their persistence or discontinuation attachment to the island as their home place and the emplacement of their cultural ties to

family and community contrasted with the displacement experienced in the urban environment. This was felt especially strongly by indigenous students, who made up a third of the cohort. The research offers insights into the socio-spatial ambiguities experienced differently in different social contexts by students seeking a better education and the opportunities of urban living and at the same time longing for the island and island community. Findings are discussed in relation to research literature on the social construction of place, place attachment and the implications of place conscious education of rurally remote students.

*From the excerpt p. 12:* This research has shown the ways in which place matters to island students, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in a myriad of ways, despite the homogenising tendency of urban-based policies, pedagogies, practices and curriculum (Corbett, 2009). Emplacement of relationships, aspirations and sense of belonging to the family and local community emerged as important aspects of social and cultural capital, especially in relation to the “alternative ways of knowing and living” of indigenous students (Tuhivai Smith, 1999, p.51). The importance of supports for successful emotional as well as academic transition to post-compulsory education have been shown to be essential in the programs of both the sending rural and the receiving urban institution (Christie, 2009). This is highlighted by the fact that some of the island students who were performing well academically, and whose aspirations before leaving the island were high, were among those who discontinued their study during Year 11. . .

The student experiences highlight practical lessons for educators about the socio-spatial context of student learning, identity and self-efficacy. Island students’ lived-in stories demonstrate how the relative inability of the education system to accommodate their social, spatial and cultural needs means that quite small disappointments or perceived failures can swing the balance towards dropping out. Tackling problems of student retention demands a nuanced approach towards “the little things that add up to mean a lot” (Wierenga, 2009, p. 184).

## **Methods**

### **Keywords and search terms used in the search**

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "location" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "migration" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "emigration" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "career intention" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "opportunity" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "Pacific" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "remote" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college retention" or "college persistence" AND "rural" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

"college dropout" AND "location"

"college dropout" AND "causes"

"college dropout" AND "reasons"

### **Databases and websites**

Google/Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest Education Journals, QuestionPoint

### **Reference Search and Selection Criteria**

The web search sought research studies that were published in peer-reviewed research journals within the last 15 years. REL Pacific searched for documents that are freely available online, but not all sources included are publically available.<sup>1</sup> Resources included also had to be in English. Resources included in this document were last accessed in February 2015. URLs, descriptions, and content included in this document were current at that time.

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<sup>1</sup> This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educational stakeholders in the Pacific Region (American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Hawai'i, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL Pacific) at McREL International. This memorandum was prepared by REL Pacific under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-17-C-0010, administered by McREL International. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.