Presidential Perceptions Concerning Human Capital in College Student Enrollment and Persistence

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ABSTRACT

With a declining population of traditional college aged students, institutions must find both new student groups to recruit and do a better job at retaining them. One obvious pool for institutions to consider are first-generation students who do not have family traditions of going to college. This population, along with others, require institutions to understand the personal development of young adults and the factors that might lead to their college enrollment. The purpose for conducting the study was to identify how college presidents perceive the importance of human capital capacity for college students in their decision to enroll in college. The study made use of a sample of 400 college presidents from different types of institutions, asking them to rate their agreement with different human capital variables and their perception of that variable as being a contributor to college enrollment. President had the highest mean agreement levels with the human capital variables of developing a strong work ethic, developing personal confidence, and developing resilience. They had the lowest mean agreement levels with learning how to take advice, wisdom, and understanding personal and family history and lore. An exploratory factor analysis provided clusters of responses, including larger themes such as self-determination and personal grit.

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Colleges and universities are facing a variety of student-centered challenges. In addition to issues such as student mental health, alcohol use and abuse, sexual health, and cheating, institutions are struggling with the most basic question of how to get students to enroll and how to keep them on campus once they arrive. Much has been written about the ‘enrollment cliff,’ a demographic trend based on lower US birth rates resulting in a smaller pool of potential students to enroll in and attend higher education. Finding ways to get students to campus is a major concern for higher education institutions (Anderson & Douglas-Gabriel, 2022), and once they arrive on campus, many state legislatures want assurances that they will attend classes and graduate in a timely manner. Performance funding formulas have become an increasingly popular way for legislatures to direct the work of institutions, requiring them to either hit certain graduation rates or provide incentives for achieving certain graduation and retention rates (Fincher, 2015).

Much of the current literature around managing enrollment has been on best practices and the practical elements of marketing to a particular generational demographic (Donachie, 2017). The larger literature base, however, addresses questions about why young adults decide to attend college. There are a variety of theories about college going decision-making (Melguizo, 2011),

and these are driven frequently by perceptions of the individual interaction within their worlds. The notion of Community Expectancy is particularly prominent in these discussions and contends that it is the people and agencies around an individual that informally and formally create and reinforce thinking about what an individual should, or should not, do and who they should and should not become (Derden, 2011).

Community Expectancy, as an emergent theory, is based largely on human and social capital, meaning the intangible resources an individual has access to. These theories of capital include not only the individuals with direct interaction with a young person developing ideas about identity, but informal resources that include agencies and organizations that might be related to a homelife. For example, a parent's social network might indirectly serve as a source of motivation and enlightenment for a young person thinking about attending college. Similarly, family friends and neighbors might serve as a source of discouragement about moving away to attend college (Tolliver, 2020). These kinds of conversations are also placed within a specific time and location, given credence to the ideas of Life Course Theory.

The current study takes this notion of Community Expectancy into consideration as it explores how colleges and universities attempt to interact with the traditionally aged students who they are trying to recruit. The institution's leadership, manifest in the role of the college president (also called a chancellor), largely dictates the actions of a campus, and presumably, these perceptions drive the actions of how students are recruited. Therefore, if presidents see value and the possible realities of community's impacting a possible student's decision to enroll in higher education, then this type of wholistic approach could be seen in how students are recruited. The resulting purpose for conducting the study was to identify how college presidents in a variety of types of institutions perceive the importance of human capital capacity for college students in their decision to enroll in college.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

College Student Enrollment

As far back as the 1950s, there has been recognition that parents and families play a critical role in a young person's decision to attend college (Lipsett & Smith, 1952). Yet, even with a supportive homelife, there have been multiple barriers identified that prevent individuals, particularly young adults from attending college. These include issues of cost, of fear of leaving home and a home community, self-perceptions of adequacy, and academic preparation (Kinzie, et al, 2004). A students ability to overcome these barriers has been identified as frequently being subject to parental and family support (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

Not all communities and family structures are similar, however, and scholars have identified a range of support mechanisms in overcoming obstacles to college enrollment. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), focused on lower-income students and the unique problems of college affordability. They identified accessing financial aid as one of the most critical components in deciding to attend college, but that parental education and support in this process was of primary importance.

Rowan-Kenyon's (2007) work stressed the need to expand conversations of episodic work and to understand the bigger picture of capital as a variable in making decisions and overcoming obstacles. This work mirrored Perna (2006) who advocated blending the disciplines of sociology with human capital and economics. Simmons (2022) study of rural young adults in a mid-southern state largely confirmed these works, highlighting the role of community agency in helping a student make the initial decision to attend college.

Human Capital

Human capital is part of a larger system of capital, or assets, that contribute to an individuals status of well-being, identity, and potentially, ability. Social and cultural capital refer to the structural elements around an individual that hold varying levels of value and have the ability to be present or exerted upon an individual. Bourdieu (1986) noted that social capital can "form… long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (p. 244).

Human capital refers to individuals and the extent that their world views, values, abilities, expectations, etc. can be visible to others. As Tolliver (2020) noted, "human capital refers to the skills, knowledge, and experiences that are invested in individuals" (p. 9). And based on Tolliver et al's (2019) work, among others (see MacCallum, 1970; Elder, 1994; Derden, 2011), individual values and behaviors as assets can be the result of exposure to other individuals. This means that the attributes of an individual might include things like a sense of work ethic, persistence, confidence, value, and sense of security can be attributed on some level to the human capital available during certain time periods of a identity development.

Community Expectancy

As Derden (2011) noted, the idea of Community Expectancy is based on much of the work of Erikson (1993; 1994) and Bourdieu (1986) who both identified the relationship elements of identity formation to an individual's exposure. The overarching concept is that an individual at a certain age, typically young adulthood, is exposed to differences, and that these differences have the potential to influence how individuals see themselves and who they want to, or perceive that they must, become. The process is made increasingly complex not only based on the stage of life that an individual is exposed to differences, but also due to Life Course Theory that posits that world events and societal outlook at a particular time in history can, in a fluid way, impact this identify formation and what values influence that formation (Elder, 1994).

Derden (2011) as well as Tolliver (2020) suggested from their research that the agency that influences identity formation can be both the individual and the organization of individuals, including cultural organizations, civic bodies, religious organizations, etc. Deggs and Miller (2012; 2017) focused their work on formal organizations that have the potential to influence individual identity and behavior, especially recognizing the role of formal governmental agencies such as schools as bodies that can strongly influence an individual.

A critical element in this process of identity development is the strength of relationships and how power and influence can be exerted. And importantly, not all relationships are direct and visible, as in some instances relationships can be unconsciously present. Sarroub (2010) noted the direct

impact of the family, for example, in accepting or not accepting cultural differences among their children, and Miller and Tuttle (2006) explored and identified college and school relationships, both direct and indirect, as having tremendous impact on how an individual views the world.

Community expectancy has been related to elements such as an individual's acceptance of help and reliance on others. Miller (2019) specifically noted the influence of other people's attitudes toward seeking mental health support, and that when the public and parents have negative opinions of seeking help for mental health services, then the individual who may well need these services similarly develops negative attitudes toward them. Tolliver's (2020) linked community expectancy specifically to human capital, and finding through his qualitative inquiry, that the elements of human capital that can be identified can well be embedded in the notion of community expectancy. This means that if the capital around an individual potential college student is structured in a specific way, the individual is more likely to pursue a college education.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary intent of the study was to begin to create an understanding of how college presidents think about elements of human capital that might influence a potential student's decision to attend college. Specifically, the study was designed to explore different elements of human capital and how important those elements are perceived to be in determining a student's decision to attend college. As such, a descriptive survey was developed by the research team and administered to a sample of current college presidents.

The survey developed and used in the study included two sections. The first was a confirmatory and descriptive section that asked responding presidents about themselves. The second section of the survey asked presidents to rate, on a 1-5 Likert-type scale 'how important is this human capital variable in determining a student's decision to attend college.' The scale was based on a 1=Strongly Disagree with the variable progressing to 5=Strongly Agree that the variable determines college attendance. The instrument was developed based on readings and the literature of human capital and was shared with 7 college leaders to gather their feedback. With revisions to the survey based on this panel's input, the survey was assumed to have an appropriate level of face validity. The survey was then distributed to a group of 25 college leaders not participating in the study and the resulting Cronbach alpha of .5999 was determined to be acceptable for the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study.

The survey was constructed and administered in an electronic format and was sent in the early fall 2022 academic term to a sample of 400 college presidents. This sample included 100 private 4-year college presidents, 100 community college presidents, 100 public 4-year doctoral/research university presidents, and 100 public 4-year comprehensive university presidents. Each segment of the sample was selected using a table of random numbers and a commercial directory of higher education institutions. Each institution that was selected for inclusion in the study was consulted online to identify the current president or campus leader, sometimes called a 'chancellor' or 'superintendent.' Selected participants first received an email indicated that they had been selected for inclusion in the study and several days later they received the survey. Four follow-up emails were sent seeking participation in the study.

FINDINGS

Of the 400 names identified in the study who received the survey, a total of 166 were returned. Three of these surveys had incomplete responses and were subsequently removed from the analysis, leaving a total of 163 usable responses (32% return rate). As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents came from public 4-year comprehensive universities (n=53, 32% of entire respondents, 53% of those identified in this category of study participants) and the fewest number of respondents were from private 4-year colleges and universities (n=31; 19%; 31%). The majority of participating presidents came from academic backgrounds (n=102; 62%), and over half of all respondents had held their current presidency 5 years or less (n=91; 56%).

In the second section of the survey, respondents were asked to rate previously identified Likert-type scale their agreement with the human capital variable as a determinant of a student's decision to attend college. Five variables had mean scores between 4.5 and 5.0, meaning that there was consensus that they were all close to being very strongly agreed with. These items, as shown in Table 2, included work ethic ($\bar{x}$ =4.74; SD .4377), confidence ($\bar{x}$ =4.66; SD .8877), resilience ($\bar{x}$ =4.56; SD .6147), a vision of the future ($\bar{x}$ =4.53; SD .7444), and persistence ($\bar{x}$ =4.51; .4222). A total of 13 items then had mean agreement levels between 4.00 and 4.49, and 3 items had mean scores under the 4.0 agreement rating. These three variables with the lowest mean scores were advice ($\bar{x}$ =3.90; SD. 9860), wisdom ($\bar{x}$ =3.86; SD 1.443), and history/lore ($\bar{x}$=3.79; SD 1.001).

The responses to the Likert-type rating were then included in An exploratory factor analysis. This type of factor analysis explores variations in the data to determine if they can be "accounted for adequately by a number of basic categories smaller than that with which the investigation was started" (Fruchter, 1954, p. 1). This analysis resulted in five statistically significant factors with an alpha level greater than .7000. As shown in Table 3, these included 5 items that related to *Self-Determination* (∞ = .777), 3 items related to *Sustenance* (∞ = .7199) 4 items related to *Intellect* (∞ = .7271) 3 items related to *Grit* (∞ = .7976) and 4 items related to *Care* (∞ = .7086).

Each factor included the following variables: *Self-Determination*: expectation, persistence, resilience, outlook, and commitment. *Sustenance*: advice, encouragement, and confidence. *Intellect*: wisdom, perspective, emotional intelligence, and history/lore. *Grit*: discipline, work ethic, and future. And, *Care* included love, support, safety, and security.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study was designed with the predominant assumption that college and university leaders would have perceptions about the role of human capital elements in determining a student's decision to attend college. That assumption appeared to be validated in the current study with 18 of 21 human capital variables receiving Agree to Strongly Agree overall means from the presidential sample. This means that college presidents agreed that these variables were important in determining who goes to college, and it also means that much of the reason a young person decides to attend college has to do with the homelife. This may not appear to be a major revelation, but these findings present strong evidence that college administrators are aware of this homelife setting as an incubator for human capital development.

As the variables tied to human capital were agreed with, there is also the implied understanding that there is much that colleges and universities cannot control as they seek to recruit students into their institutions. Colleges cannot control the security, feeling of value, or love an individual feels and how these variables might contribute to a sense of self-worth and ultimately, a decision to pursue further education. This does open an opportunity for colleges and universities to consider their role in community development, including the supports and resources they provide to community members on activities such as effective parenting and how community's go about supporting their residents. Communities that provide support for residents, allowing them to experience the variables that are perceived to contribute to college enrollment, may well be those that experience higher levels of educational attainment, openness to accepting differences, and ultimately, a higher quality of life for residents.

The strongest agreed to items were work ethic, confidence, and resilience, all attributes that might lend themselves to success in any profession or endeavor. Interestingly, though, was that the least agreed to variable was that of history/lore, meaning a sense of a person's background, familial struggles, place in the world, etc. The genealogy of a person, the lineage of a parent or guardian, etc. had a mean rating somewhere between "neutral" and "agree" ($\bar{x}$ =3.79). This could mean a person's background is seen as having less to do with continuing an education than other variables, but it could also suggest a more forward-thinking perspective by college leaders. And, importantly, the relatively low mean rating might have elements of concern if colleges and universities have an intention and possible future reliance on under-represented minorities. For many of these groups of potential students, their family histories may well play an important part of their identity formation. Whether they are stories of immigration, repression, or even slavery, these histories may well make up a significant part of a potential student's world view and outlook for the future. This concept of history and lore, as a human capital variable, therefore needs additional exploration.

The factor analysis conducted as part of the data analysis does show that there many be interrelationships between many of the human capital variables included in the study. This analysis also demonstrates that there may be broad areas of human capital that could influence identity formation and ultimately decisions about what happens after secondary enrollment. Future research should consider these kinds of findings and work to better understand how these interrelationships not only impact individual development, but importantly, how they impact certain life decisions, such as leaving a rural community, breaking a family tradition of a certain type of occupation or living location, etc. Specifically, exploring how first-generation college students use, rely upon, and develop their human capital in making decisions to attend college are important and vastly overlooked in the literature.

Finally, as an exploratory research study, these findings begin an important exploration that needs to be furthered. Drawing upon US Census and state level data, questions of household stability, migration behaviors, community migration behaviors, and even head-of-household behaviors should be considered in developing predictive models of who is attending college, and why. By triangulating data from multiple sources, scholars and practitioners might become better prepared to predict the community-level variables that interact with household-level variables in predicting college participation. All of these findings and recommendations must also be

considered in conjunction with college level administrators, and presidents in specific, who have the authority and resources necessary to develop models and set priorities for the future recruitment of college students.

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Table 1.
Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	n	%/N	%/n
Institution type			
Private 4-year	31	19%	31%
Community college	33	20	20
Public, 4-year doctoral	46	28	46
Public, 4-year comprehensive	53	32	53
President's background			
Academic	102	62	
Industry/business	13	8	
Administrative	37	23	
Other (government, military, etc.)	11	7	
Time in presidency			
Under 5 years	91	56	
6-10 years	58	35	
More than 10 years	14	8	

Table 2.
Senior Leader Perceptions of Human Capital

Element of Human Capital	$\bar{x}$	SD	Range
How important is this human capital variable in determining a student's decision to attend college?			
Work ethic	4.74	.4377	3
Confidence	4.66	.8877	4
Resilience	4.56	.6147	4
Vision of future	4.53	.7444	5
Persistence	4.51	.4222	3
Security	4.49	.8624	3
Emotional Intelligence	4.48	.4389	4
Discipline	4.38	.6214	3
Support	4.37	.7430	4
Outlook	4.25	.4361	4
Expectation	4.25	.5055	3
Feeling of value	4.24	.6321	5
Encouragement	4.22	.8880	4
Feeling of safety	4.14	1.034	4
Love	4.10	.8620	5
Commitment	4.06	.7614	5
Emotional reference/support	4.03	1.116	5
Perspective	4.00	.8112	4
Advice	3.90	.986o	5
Wisdom	3.86	1.443	4
History/Lore	3.79	1.001	5

Table 3.
Results of factor analysis

Factor	Variables	∞
1	Expectation	.5755
	Persistence	.7615
Self-Determination	Resilience	.7122
	Outlook	.6198
	Commitment	.5555
	Alpha	.7777
2	Advice	.8299
	Encouragement	.8288
Sustenance	Confidence	.4223
	Alpha	.7199
3	Wisdom	.6766
	Perspective	.7542
Intellect	Emotional Intelligence	.6431
	History/Lore	.5841
	Alpha	.7271
4	Discipline	.8115
	Work ethic	.7851
Grit	Future	.7299
	Alpha	.7976
5	Love	.5513
	Support	.5051
Care	Safety	.6668
	Security	.5674
	Alpha	.7086