

Retention in Business Education: Understanding Business Student Perceptions of Academic Advising and College Life

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which first year business students' views of several advising resources and the degree of challenge students faced with respect to college life had on their retention in a business education program. Several statistical analyses found that a significantly higher percentage of students who said they would not return the following semester indicated that their advisor was less willing to answer questions and were much less satisfied with the support from their advisor. Additionally, students who expressed having challenges with some aspects of college life such as being away from home, adjusting to dorm life, and maintaining relationships with persons from home were more likely to say that they would not return the following semester. This study also investigates how gender and major affect college life adjustment and retention for business students during their first year of college.

Key Words: First-year students, college life, retention, business students, business education.

Introduction

There are a variety of reasons that higher education is increasingly highlighting persistence rates including financial demands, reputation enhancements, and perceived advantages in admission. There has been extensive body of research literature that is dedicated to helping student succeed in higher education and for them to persist (Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Schaller, Schreiner & Associates, 2010). However, the national rate of student persistence and graduation has shown little change over the past decade (NCES, 2005). Despite many years of work on this complex issue, there are still more areas that need to be explored.

First-year seminars have been adopted by a majority of colleges and universities in United States with increased retention rates as the primary goal. There are vast amounts of research studies on the impact of such first-year seminars on retention (Tobolowsky, Cox, Wagner, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). Many experts contend that these seminar courses are beneficial to freshmen students (Williford, Chapman, & Kahrig, 2001; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). Because the content of the first year seminar varies among colleges and universities, the effects of specific aspects of the seminar on retention are yet to be investigated.

Several years ago, the first-year seminar course, Foundations of Business Administration (FBA) BSN 101, was developed in the business school of a local university. It is designed to provide introductory business education to declared, business first-year and transfer students. Students are introduced to all disciplines in the college of business through a foundational business education course and it is through this course that students learn what educational coursework they need to complete in their academic business program. Information on the possible career opportunities are also presented for each discipline. At the end of the semester, students were surveyed on the impact of several specific areas of advising resources (the seminar course, advisor, course instructors, staff, catalog, friends, and parents), and the challenge levels of various college life (school work load, away from home, maintaining relationships with persons from home, adjusting to dorm life, finding social fit, and job demand) on their decision to return the following semester.

The objectives of this study are 1) to explore the perceptions of business students, who were enrolled in a FBA course, concerning their academic advising and college life; 2) to investigate the extent of impact gender and being a business major have on students' desire to return the following semester as a business major

Literature Review

Entering college is a major transition for most freshmen students. Sadly, some students are unsuccessful and lack the ability to adjust to college life. Increasingly, colleges have developed first-years seminars, orientation, and other programs to assist freshmen students with the transition to college life. There is a plethora of literature on each topical area independently including retention in higher education, first-year seminars, undergraduate students, university experience courses, and seminars purposes, content, and processes (Anderson, Gardner, & Kuh, 2006; Swing, 2001; Tobolowsky, Cox, & Wagner, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005; Williford, Chapman, & Kahrig, 2001) as well as program assessment (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2009). Astin et al. (2002) who completed a 35-year study showed aspects which promote the first-year seminar and how important it is for student adjustment and transition to be tied to active learning in order for students to be successful in college. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) also have synthesized considerable amounts of research relating to the first-year seminar course. They have found substantial evidence indicating that first-year seminar initiatives increase persistence to not only the second year of college but to degree completion.

Interestingly, the results of the study done by Hendel (2007) indicated that the first year seminar did not increase the probability of retention; only high school rank was a significant contributor to the prediction of freshmen to sophomore retention. The same study revealed that students who participated in the first year seminar had experienced a greater sense of community during their first year which may contribute to retention into a second year. Research by Pascarella and Chapman (1983), and Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, and Associates (2005) reinforce the importance of student involvement with respect to student retention. A good social fit between the student and college has been found to be an important factor of success in college (DesJaradins, et. al. 2002) While first year students are adjusting to college life, some still need the support of their previous community. In a study, Torres (2003) suggested that for many students the ability to remain connected to their past communities, family, or church was essential to their persistence. The advisor-advisee relationship plays a large role in students making the social transition to the college environment and increases the likelihood of the student persisting towards graduation (Nutt, 2003). Habley (2004) suggested that one of the primary factors affecting college retention is the quality of interaction a student has with a concerned person on campus. Academic advising may be one of the ways in which an institution can implement and encourage this type of interaction.

The demographics of higher education are changing and women make up a large proportion of today's undergraduate student population (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005) and, it is suggested that women persist to graduation more often than men do. A classic study completed by Josselson (1987) examined college-aged women and their experiences with college life and found that women's separation from their life prior to coming to school was different from male students. Also, Jones (2010) found that there is a relationship between gender and social support; the impact of social integration on subsequent institutional commitment and retention differs between male and female students. According to many authors including Leppel (2001) and Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Schaller, Schreiner, & Associates (2010) students' selection of their college major is impacted by their gender.

Women are more likely to persist in their undergraduate academic program if they major in education, health, and humanities, but their chance of persisting decreases if they move from a liberal arts focus to a business focus even if they are capable of high academic achievement. Male students persist more if their major is business and are less likely to persist if their major is education (Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Schaller, Schreiner, & Associates, 2010; Leppel, 2001). Knowledge of the relationship between gender, social support, and major choices suggests a need to explore how a student's gender and major affect their persistence in a degree program. Additionally, what have not been explored are the specific aspects of involvements, personal connections, or college life that affect retention. For this paper, the authors wanted to explore one of the institutional characteristics found in the literature (academic advising) and the various student characteristics associated with attrition (college life) would affect business student persistence to reach his or her educational goals.

Method

A survey was administered in all Foundations of Business Administration (FBA) classes for seven semesters starting with the spring 2006 semester. The FBA is a 2-credit interdisciplinary course designed to benefit the student's overall development as a freshman majoring in business and to also meet the standards of The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Students were introduced to all majors within the college of business as to their course requirements and career opportunities. A four-year study plan and participation in at least one extracurricular activity is required for all students who enrolled in FBA class. The four-year study plan includes the student's personal goals and outlines major course work, general education requirements, and free electives the student intends to schedule in future semesters. Each student works in class with the instructor to develop his or her personalized plan before scheduling classes. The student also discusses the study plan with his or her advisor.

The survey questionnaire was designed to obtain information on, 1) students' views of several advising resources such as advisors, course instructors, department staff, friends, and parents as well as the university catalog and the FBA course; 2) degree of challenge perceived by students on several areas of their college life such as being away from home, dormitory life, school work, having a job while in school, social fit, and maintaining relationships with persons from home; and 3) whether or not students would return for the next semester. The objective was to determine if freshmen students' perception of advising resources and the challenges of college life would affect retention. For the purpose of this study, the authors believed it was more appropriate to include only freshmen respondents who were younger than twenty-four years old and those who indicated whether or not they would return the following semester. Thus, a total of 913 business students were the respondents of this study. The respondents were 64.3% male and 35.7% female. Of the sample, 95.2% indicated that they would return next semester. Data also indicated that 3.5% of those who would return to the University would not remain a business major. A number of tables and charts were constructed to provide visual comparisons of several variables between students who indicated they would return and students who indicated that they may not return. Chi-square tests and MANOVA tests were also performed to study if there were differences in students' perceptions on various advising resources as well as the perceived degree of challenges students encountered in college life between these two groups of respondents. In addition, this study also investigates the roles of gender and choosing to be a business major play on first-year students' perceptions of advising resources and challenges of student life.

Results

I. Return vs. non-return

In order to gain insight on how students' views on advising resources and their experiences of adjusting to college life affect retention, several comparisons were conducted. First, the entire data were divided into two groups: one group consisted of students who would return and the other group consisted of students who may not return to the University. The perceived usefulness of various advising resources and the degree of challenge on various aspects of college life experienced by students were compared between students in these two groups.

Advising Resources. Table 1 shows that a much smaller percentage of students who may not return to the University feel that their advisor is willing to discuss the 4-year study plan with them. For students who would return to the University, 79.7% strongly agree or agree their advisor is willing to discuss the four-year study plan with them, and 8.1% strongly disagree or disagree. For students who may not return to the University, percentage of strongly agree or agree drops to 63.7%, and percentage of strongly disagree or disagree is 9.1%.

Table 1 my advisor is willing to discuss study plan with me expressed by students who may or may not return to the University.

Level of Agreement	Percentage of Responses	
	Return	May not Return
Strongly Agree	37.6%	27.3%
Agree	42.1%	36.4%
Neutral	12.1%	27.3%
Disagree	5.6%	9.1%
Strongly Disagree	2.5%	0.0%

Chi-square test confirms that there is a significant difference on the willingness of advisor to discuss a study plan as perceived by the two groups of students. Table 2 shows that the percentage of students who feel their advisor is willing to answer their questions is also smaller among students who may not return. The percentage of strongly agree or agree is 85.4% for students who may return versus 77.3% for students who may not return. Chi-square test confirms, again, that there is a significant difference in opinions expressed by two groups of students concerning the willingness of their advisor in answering questions. Specifically, a smaller percentage of students who may not return feel their advisor is willing to answer their questions.

Table 2 My advisor is willing to answer my questions expressed by students who may or may not return to the University.

Level of Agreement	Percentage of Responses	
	Return	May not Return
Strongly Agree	48.2%	31.8%
Agree	37.2%	45.5%
Neutral	9.7%	15.9%
Disagree	3.8%	2.3%
Strongly Disagree	1.2%	4.5%

From the above two tables, one may conclude that students who indicated that they may not return have a much less favorable view about their advisor. They perceive that their advisor is not as willing to answer questions or discuss the four-year study plan with them. When comparing students' perceptions on the usefulness of several advising resources in terms of percentages of agree and strongly agree, it is found that students who may not return have lower percentages in strongly agree or agree on almost all advising resources except for assistance from staff. The most noticeable differences are students' views on the advice they receive from their advisor and friends. Students who may not return feel their advisor and friends are less helpful compared to students who will return. Specifically, the percentage of strongly agree or agree that the advisor is a useful advising resource is approximately 75.7% for those who will return and 65.9% for those who will not return. For the helpfulness of friends, the percentages are 77.3% versus 66.0%. Combined with the results shown in Table 1 and Table 2, it is clear that students who may not return are less satisfied with the assistance they have received from their advisor and they are also less likely to seek help from their friends. It is reasonable to conclude that the perceived lack of support from the student's advisor or friends does not motivate nor encourage the student's desire to return for the following semester.

College life. Data further suggests that there are differences in perceived level of challenge on several aspects of college life between these groups of students. Table 3 provides the mean and standard deviation of the responses to the questions regarding the level of challenge (1=least challenge, 10= most challenge) in the areas of school work load, away from home, maintaining relationships with people from home, dorm life, social fit, and having a job while in school.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of the responses to survey questions regarding the challenge level on some aspects of college life.

Aspects of College Life	Return		May not Return	
	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation
School work	6.53	2.02	6.34	2.38
Away from home	3.19	2.41	4.65	3.25
Maintaining relationships from home	4.02	2.64	4.05	3.08
Dorm life	3.35	2.29	4.29	2.85
Social fit	3.08	2.25	3.48	2.49
Job	2.14	2.31	2.26	2.64
# of times going home per month	1.81	2.21	2.50	1.69
# of class skipped per week	0.55	0.92	0.83	1.11

It may not be surprising that this table shows school work yields the highest challenge score for both groups. The mean in school work for students who indicated that they may not return is slightly lower but the standard deviation is a little higher than that of the group who indicated that they would return. Furthermore, Table 3 shows that the mean levels of challenge on other aspects of college life for students who may not return are higher with a larger standard deviation. In addition, MANOVA shows that there are significant differences in perceived mean challenge level given by the respondents in the areas of being away from home and adjusting to dorm life between the two groups of freshmen. It is evident that freshmen students who may not return to campus the following semester have major difficulties in making the transition from high school to college. It is also found that students who indicated that they may not return go home more often and skip more classes.

Data further reveals that 3.5% of freshmen who will return next semester would not want to be a business major, while 22.7% of those who may not return indicated a desire of changing to a non-business major. Though changing a major is not uncommon for freshmen students, one may speculate that the uncertainty of a major might negatively affect the overall college experience for some freshmen, especially for those who already have had difficulties in adjusting to some aspects of college life.

II. Gender effects

To investigate the role gender plays in student's perceptions concerning the usefulness of advising resources and the challenge level in several aspects of college life, several statistical tests were conducted. T-tests revealed that female students feel that their advisor is less helpful and is not as willing to answer the questions compared to that indicated by male students. While more female students than male students feel that the FBA course, study plan, and catalog are helpful, they also value the advice given by their parents much more than male students. While there are significant differences in the perceived level of challenge on several aspects of college life between male and female students, school work load poses the greatest challenge for both male and female freshmen. In addition, MANOVA test shows that female freshmen students experience a significantly higher challenge than male freshmen students in the areas of being away from home, adjusting to dorm life, having a job, and finding social fit. Thus, gender should be a major consideration for colleges in providing resources for freshmen students. Specifically, female freshmen students need more support to ease the transition to college life.

Interestingly, there is no significant difference in percentage of freshman students who may not return the following semester between male students and female students; they are approximately 5%. For freshmen who may not return, MANOVA test shows that gender plays no significant role in any of the aspects of college life considered in this study. That is, male and female students who may not return exhibit similar perceptions on the stress levels of various aspects of college life. However, female freshmen students who may not return view all advising resources are more useful than male students in the same group except friends. For example, 80.0% of female students in the group feel their advisor is helpful compared to only 57.7% for male students; 66.7% of female students value their parents' opinion compared to 57.7% for male students; 53.3% of female students think advice from a friend is useful compared to 69.2% for male students. That is, female students who may not return to the University view the advice from their advisor and parents more helpful than male students of the same group. Yet, more male students who may not return felt the advice from their friends helpful.

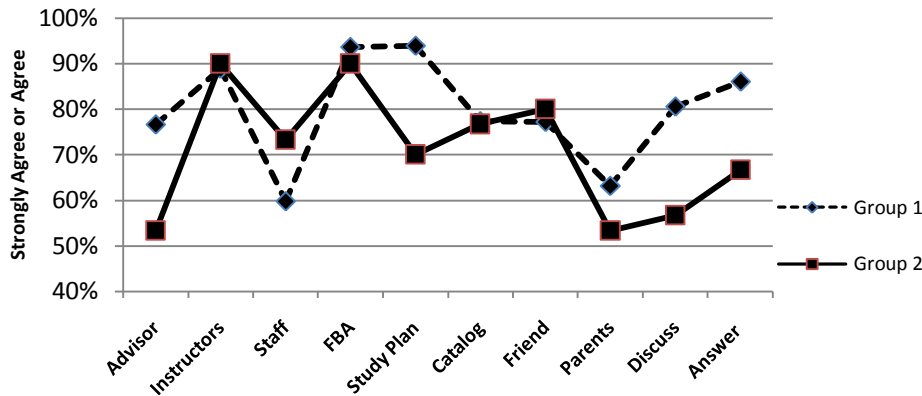
III. Major effects

The FBA course is restricted to business majors. That is, every student in the data set had declared business as a major. Upon exploring the data further, it is found that there are students who would return to the University the following semester but are no longer interested in business. Similarly, there is another group of students who would stay in the field of business but would not want to return to the University. To investigate these groups of students further, the data was divided into four groups: return to the University and stay in business (Group 1), return to the University but may not stay in business (Group 2), may not return to the University but would stay in business (Group 3), and may not return to the University and may not stay in business (Group 4).

Group 1 versus Group 2. Considering the fact that the University has a reputable business program, it is important to investigate any differences in perceptions of advising resources between students in group 1 and group 2. Figure 1 shows that students in Group 2 have a much less favorable view about their advisor than students in Group 1. For example, only 53% of students in Group 2 strongly agree or agree that their advisor is helpful as oppose to 77% of students in Group 1. They also do not feel 4-year study plan required by FBA course is very helpful since they will not stay in the business field. Both groups view course instructors and FBA course are the most useful advising resources.

Since both of these two groups of students would return to the University, the data concurs that there are no significant differences between the two groups in their views of the challenge level on various aspects of college life. But, students in Group 2 skip more classes than students in group 1. One may speculate reasons that students in Group 2, after taking FBA course in which they were introduced the details of each business program at the University, decided to change their major to a non-business field. These students might have difficulties managing basic business foundation classes or they have lost interests in business.

Figure 1. Comparison of perceptions on advising resources between students in Group 1 and Group 2.



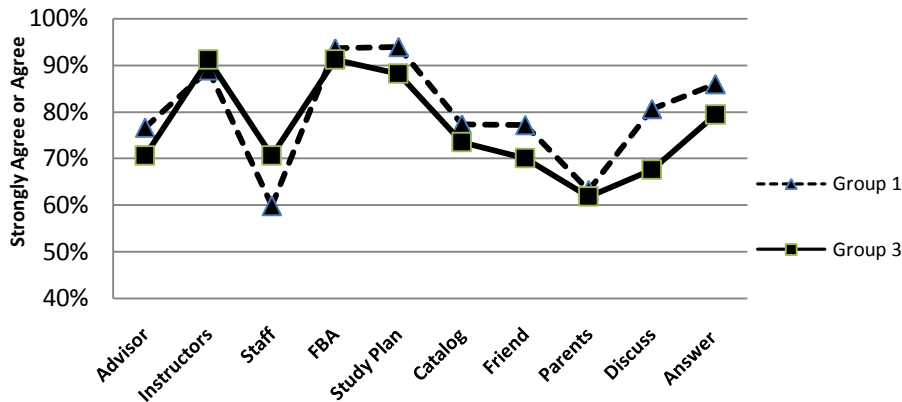
Group 1 consists of 64.6% male students and 35.4% female students. It is found that a smaller percentage of female students in Group 1 strongly agree or agree their advisor and FBA course are useful or their advisor is willing to answer questions, but a larger percentage feel the study plan and catalog are useful. In addition, they value the advice given by their parents much more than male students in this group. However, the rankings for the usefulness of the advising resources are very similar between male and female students in Group 1. The FBA course and study plan are on the top, and advisor and parents are on the bottom of the list for both male and female students.

There are several significant differences between male and female students in the areas of college life. Being away from home, adjusting to dorm life, finding a social fit, and working at a job are considerably more challenging for female students than male students in Group 1. The only significant difference in the views of usefulness for the advising resources perceived by male and female students in Group 2 is parents. It is surprising that 84.6% of female students in Group 2 strongly agree or agree that their parents are helpful in providing academic advice compared to only 29.4% of male students having the same view. Being away from home is the only aspect of college life that female students express feeling significantly more challenging than male students in the group.

Group 1 versus Group 3. There are 4% of students who would still want to be a business major but may not return to the University. Comparing their perceptions of various advising resources with that of Group 1, Chi-square tests show that there is no significant difference on the perceived usefulness of any of the advising resources in this study. This suggests that students in Group 3 have the same perceptions on the usefulness of advising resources as those in Group 1. Figure 2 depicts these similarities. The major differences between these two groups of students are in the areas of adjusting to the college life. Several t-tests show that Group 3 students want to remain a business major but would not return to the University, and have experienced a significantly higher level of challenge for being away from home, adjusting to dorm life, and trying to fit in socially. It is reasonable to conclude that the difficulty of handling some aspects of college life is one of the major reasons students in Group 3 would not return to the University.

The only significant difference found between male and female students in Group 3 are their views on the FBA course and perceived challenge level for dorm life. Female students feel the FBA course plays a much more important role in advising, and they indicated that adjusting dorm life is more difficult.

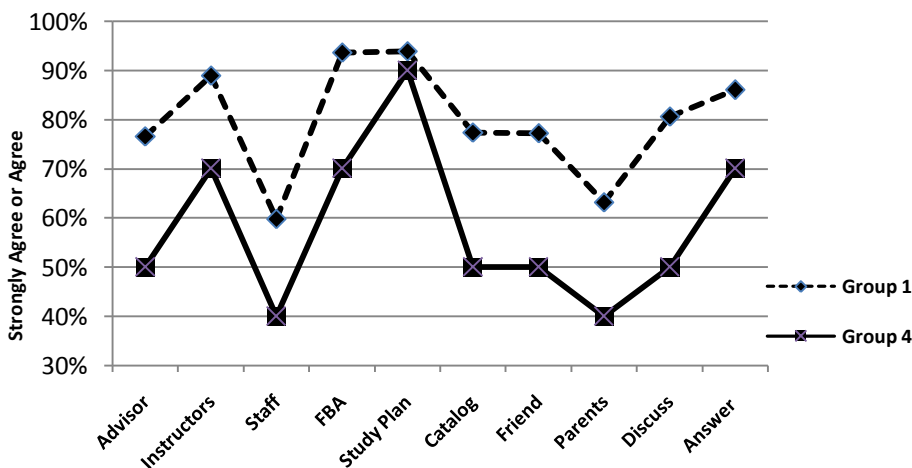
Figure 2. Comparison of perceptions on advising resources between students in Group 1 and Group 3.



Group 1 vs. Group 4. There are only 1% of students in our data set belong to Group 4, students who would not return to the University and would not stay as a business major either. Figure 3 shows significantly lower percentages of students in Group 4 strongly agree or agree the advising resources in this study are useful. In fact, the difference between the two groups is approximately 20% for all areas except for study plan where the difference is 4%. Studying the differences in adjusting to college life between these two groups of students, analysis of variance tests show that students in Group 4 skip more classes, work more hours at a job, and also experience a greater stress for having a job. However, they express lower stress level in other areas of college life, such as away from home, handling dorm life, or finding the social fit.

Gender has no effect on the view of advising resources or stress level of college life for students in Group 4. It is reasonable to think students in Group 4 who not only may not return to the University but also would change to a non-business major are somewhat less connected with their advisor, friends, or parents.

Figure 3. Comparison of perceptions on advising resources between students in Group 1 and Group 4.



Conclusion

This study shows the importance of advising and faculty advisor support on student persistence. It also shows that course instructors play an important role of advising students, particularly, the freshmen. Students who said they may not return felt that their advisor was not willing to answer questions or discuss the 4-year plan with them. Improving relationship between advisor and students should be considered when college administrators try to increase retention rate. Additionally, freshmen students in the study who indicated that they may not return skipped classes more often, went home more frequently, and found being away from home, adjusting to dorm life, maintaining the relationship with persons from home, and trying to fit in overall more challenging.

It was also found that this group of students not only had less favorable view of their advisor; they also rely on the help of their friends less than students who would return to the University. One may speculate that this group of students is more connected to their home community than the university. Concerning the role gender play in retention, it is found that there are equal percentages of male and female students who indicate that they would not return. However, female freshmen students experience a significantly higher level of stress than male freshmen students in the areas of being away from home, adjusting to dorm life, having a job, and finding social fit. They are also much less satisfied with their advisor, but more connected with their parents.

Furthermore, this study shows that the perceived lack of support from the advisor has a negative impact on students' decision of returning to the University, or returning to the University but not as a business major. Although the difficulty of adjusting to college life is a major factor, the combination of lack of support from the advisor and difficulties in some aspects of college life make returning the following semester to the University an unappealing option for some students. Advisor and course instructors should be encouraged that their support might help the transition to college life for many students, especially female freshmen students. This vital support may affect students' decision of returning for next semester.

Students have a very favorable view on the value of the FBA course and the 4-year study plan, especially for those who would remain as a business major. It suggests that the FBA course, a freshmen business education seminar course, benefits business students and is a vital component in the retention effort. It is through this general introductory business education course that students understand what their educational program requirements encompass and what their future career outlook will be like. This course also provides opportunities for the advisors, who are business faculty, to encourage students to persist through their business coursework.

Finally, this study shows that improving relationship between faculty members, who serve as advisors, and the students is a good strategy for student retention. The reasons that students choose not to return vary and are often complicated. However, this study reveals and reinforces some of the things an institution can do to increase their retention rate. Retention strategies include improving the student and advisor relationship, having the advisor more accessible to students, making course instructors aware of their role on retention, having a required first-year seminar course, helping students to get involved in the university community, and providing tools for students to obtain social support.

Truly understanding why students leave only can be a win-win situation. Institutions and students both lose if students do not complete their educational goals. Moreover, universities, colleges, and more specifically, advisors, may consider paying more attention to the needs of first-year female students. Often time they are having a slightly harder adjustment to higher education and may need additional resources to enable them to have a smoother transition to college life.

The findings of this study can be a reference for university personnel of the issues faced by incoming business students. This study shows that the first year seminar course, the advisor and advisee relationship, college life adjustments, and a student's gender all play an important role on freshman retention. Institutes that confront retention issues have to consider multiple aspects that may affect a freshman student's decision to return to the university.

There are limitless retention strategies available for institutions to model; however, integrating efforts to examine non-academic and academic factors of retention is needed to fully comprehend attrition issues. Studies that explore if business students completing a first-year seminar course progress and complete their second year of study at the institution would also be very helpful in evaluating the effect the first-year seminar course on the retention of sophomore business students. For future research and to understand even more about student retention, non-academic factors such as student self-efficacy, student social support (family and friends), financial needs, and the student's level of institutional commitment should all be taken into consideration.

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