EDITORS' NOTES

For decades, persistence researchers have considered implications for institutional practice, but there has been little applied research that examines the effects of the remedies recommended by the researchers. Instead, it is widely assumed we know a great deal about "best practices" and that we should organize professional programs for college personnel to promote these practices. However, what if the recommended practices do not work as well as intended? What if recurring challenges go unaddressed even when the best-practices approach is used? If the demographics of student populations change, does conventional wisdom about best practices still apply? And what if, due to revenue constraints, student affairs and academic administrators are forced to redirect their efforts to address these critical challenges?

While standard persistence research is well positioned to continue producing replicated studies for systematic review and comparison, the more difficult issues related to improving academic success for an increasingly diverse student clientele go largely unaddressed. Braxton's *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (2000) introduced variations on the common theoretical lenses used to study diversity, but that volume did not address the more applied challenge of using persistence research to support academic improvement. In comparison to the persistence research tradition as we have known it, we now face a street-level, working-class challenge: to provide high-quality institutional research that not only informs difficult institutional decisions about resource reallocation but that also encourages practitioners—college teachers and student affairs administrators—to face up to the critical challenges now facing higher education. With increasing numbers and diversity of students on the one hand and declining public financial support on the other, many colleges and universities face critical challenges in their efforts to improve student success.

This volume of *New Directions for Institutional Research* takes a step forward in higher education research by introducing a new approach to applied inquiry and evaluation. Rather than engaging in paradigmatic persistence research that has vague implications for practice, the authors in this volume begin the process of addressing the more elusive goal of conducting applied studies that can be used to inform faculty and administrators about and engage them in the process of changing their institutions by enabling and encouraging them to experiment with new approaches to their most critical challenges.

At this point, some skeptical readers may be harboring doubts about these claims, especially the notion that persistence research has not provided

sound evaluative information. As it turns out, this claim has a sound basis and it provides a point of departure for this volume. Three of the chapters in this volume were prepared for a planning project that aimed to develop a new center for persistence research and the support of change. What we learned from these thoughtful pieces was that a new approach was needed. We needed to rethink the role of institutional research in support of academic improvement. Based on this reflection, we decided to take a more action-oriented approach using research to support assessment and an inquiry-based approach to encourage and engage in reform. Three of the chapters in this volume also illustrate how this new approach can work.

Rethinking Persistence Research

The planning project for a new retention center began as an idea that would build on years of work in Indiana and elsewhere that focused on retention. We thought Indiana University would be a good place for such a center, not only because several established persistence scholars were there, but also because there had been a large investment in retention projects by Lilly Endowment and Lumina Foundation for Education. Surely this was the place to start. As a first step in the project, Charlie Nelms, the Principal Investigator for the project (and Indiana University's Vice President for Institutional Development and Student Affairs), asked Don Hossler to review existing persistence research to see what had been learned about the types of programs that improve persistence. The answer was a surprise.

In Chapter One, Lori Patton, Carla Morelon, Dawn Michele Whitehead, and Hossler summarize their review of prior research. Surprisingly, to us at least, there were very few studies of the impact of interventions on persistence, with the exception of a rather large body of research on the effects of financial aid on persistence. The authors reviewed the major journals with research on college students and found only a few examples of rigorous studies supporting only limited conclusions. When these findings were presented to representatives of a number of Indiana's colleges and universities in the spring of 2003, they were received with disbelief. Certainly it was not true in Indiana, they argued, especially since the Lilly Endowment had required evaluations of the effects of their investments. Because it is possible that applied studies are done but not published, we decided to test this claim and solicited every evaluation study that could be found in the state or that campuses were willing to have reviewed.

In addition, we went to one of the nation's persistence experts to review these studies. We wanted to learn that Indiana was indeed different and allowed our bias to show through. In Chapter Two, John M. Braxton, Jeff McKinney, and Pauline J. Reynolds present their review of the Indiana studies. While a number of studies combined documentation of programs with reviews of trends in persistence rates, very few actually provided well-

designed evaluations that controlled for other variables that might influence persistence. Using a reasonable quality standard, Braxton and his research assistants found only a few noteworthy examples, but far fewer than we expected.

As part of the planning process, Deborah Faye Carter collaborated with the planning team in the review of prior research. In Chapter Three, Dr. Carter reviews the research on minority-student persistence, one of the critical challenges facing Indiana higher education. Once a challenge is identified, it is important to look externally as well as internally for possible solutions. In this case, Carter reviews the research—a major external source of information—to discern what can be learned from prior research.

Refocusing on Academic Success

Throughout this period of review, we listened to our critics as well, in particular, our colleague in Indianapolis, Victor Borden, who kept reminding us that we "research types" kept overlooking the real-life problems of institutional research professionals who seek better ways to engage in collaborative research with faculty and administrators. In Chapter Four, Michele J. Hansen and Victor M.H. Borden introduce a new way of viewing the persistence problem. They argue that research should be used to support improvement in academic success. Rather than evaluate, researchers should first collaborate on building an understanding of the problem, support and inform the redesign of practice, and assist with the evaluations, using the results to inform practice. While their example used qualitative methods, it also seems possible to use quantitative methods in this type of collaborative process.

The four thoughtful and provocative chapters that form the first half of this volume provided a substantial portion of the new foundations for conceptualizing the Indiana Project on Academic Success (IPAS). Our aims were not only to be more applied than was evidenced in the tradition of persistence research, but also to be supportive of change. I had for years been advocating an inquiry-based approach to reform in higher education (St. John, 1994, 1995; St. John and Paulsen, 2001), a notion that was based on my experience with K-12 school reform (Finnan, St. John, McCarthy, and Slovacek, 1995; St. John, Griffith, and Allen-Haynes, 1997) but that had not been systematically tested in higher education.

Rather than argue for a retention center—and with the encouragement of Lumina Foundation to think differently about the problem—we embarked on a new approach. IPAS introduced a new, inquiry-based approach to reform, as detailed in Table 1. The process starts with assessment—not to prove success but to uncover critical challenges that cry out for attention. In this view, if assessment does not uncover challenges, then it has failed our intent for reform. In the normal course of institutional behavior, critical recurring challenges often go unaddressed—or at least so we thought.

Table 1. Overview of the Stages in the IPAS Process

Stage 1 Assessment	• Compare campus assessment information to statewide assessment results; identify possible challenges.
	• Collect additional information from campus sources, such as prior reports and studies and focus group interviews.
	• Organize teams of administrators, faculty, professional staff, and students to identify critical challenges on the campus.
	• Prioritize the challenges, identifying two or three that merit special attention at a campus level.
Stage 2 Organizing	• Coordinate the assessment and inquiry process with campus-level planning and budgeting; integrate the challenges with strategic plans; coordinate budgeting to provide necessary support.
	• Appoint workgroups to address critical, campus-wide challenges; consider providing release time to team leaders to work on tasks for the campus.
	• Coordinate the inquiry process (activities of the workgroups) with campus planning and budgeting.
Stage 3 Action Inquiry	Each campus workgroup engages in a process to
	1. Build an Understanding of the Challenge
	2. Look Internally and Externally for Solutions
	3. Assess Possible Solutions
	4. Develop Action Plans
	5. Implement Pilot Test and Evaluate
Stage 4 Evaluation	The campus coordinating teams
	• Coordinate implementation and evaluation, review plans, encourage presentations to campus planning groups, and help coordinate the inquiry process with campus planning.
	• Coordinate evaluation support of pilot tests with the IPAS project team and campus groups.

Source: The IPAS Resource Guide, 2004, Indiana Project on Academic Success.

The assessment phase of this project involved the following activities:

• Assessing statewide student outcomes using state-level databases and parallel campus-specific assessments
• Introducing the assessment process to participating colleges in a workshop, providing statewide assessment results and campus analyses
• Encouraging campuses to uncover their own critical challenges using our analyses or existing evidence from their own work to identify campus needs

After the campuses completed their assessments, we encouraged them to organize staff workgroups to address the challenges using inquiry, with IPAS staff providing technical support for the workgroups. A team of pro-

fessionals and graduate students functioned as consultants to the campuses. We think that this process has helped document and illustrate an alternative approach to technical support.

The statewide assessment used a statewide database to examine the 2000 high school cohort's preparation, college-enrollment decisions, and persistence (St. John, Musoba, and Chung, 2004). We found a relationship between high school curricula and SAT scores, college enrollment, and persistence. We also found that student financial aid was linked to these outcomes. However, when we shared the results with the campuses, we learned we needed to examine the pathways of nontraditional students as well, so we engaged in a large number of additional analyses in support of the campuses.

While the statewide research is not the focal point of this volume, one set of results merits note: our analyses of persistence by racial or ethnic groups (St. John, Carter, Chung, and Musoba, 2006). In the persistence analyses for whites and for the population as a whole, we found—controlling for background, preparation, and other factors—that having declared a major was positively associated with persistence during the first two years of college.

As Carter discusses in Chapter Three, the analyses of persistence by African Americans found that students who had declared majors were less likely to persist—controlling for these same variables. Although high-achieving African Americans were more likely to have declared their majors—controlling for prior preparation—they were also more likely to drop out. This issue, along with the need to serve nontraditional-age and working students better, became major statewide challenges.

Two of the chapters in this volume illustrate that university-based inquiry, coupled with technical support from professional staff, can provide campuses with the support needed to engage in research-informed change. Once our participating campuses had gone through their own assessment processes, most identified critical challenges. When issues were large and cut across campuses, we conducted literature reviews to see what we could learn. We also provided technical support for campuses to use inquiry to address their challenges and to evaluate the results of their interventions.

The inquiry process itself involves focusing on possible explanations for the challenges and identifying solutions that merit testing in practice. We encouraged teams on the campuses to identify a range of possible solutions, to assess which ones had the best chances of addressing the challenge, and to test them through practice. In Chapter Five, St. John, McKinney, and Tina Tuttle describe the action-inquiry process and the roles of technical assistance providers and present a couple of campus examples. They also describe how the inquiry process was adapted at a few campuses to integrate evaluation into the process of building understanding of the challenge, closing the loop.

The underlying challenge in the process of change on many college and university campuses is to use evaluation research systematically to examine the effects of intervention. Rather than viewing the aim of evaluation as the validation of decisions, we see it as part of the process of discovering better

ways of addressing critical, recurring challenges. In Chapter Six, Glenda Droogsma Musoba provides background on the workable-models approach to evaluation research used in this study and provides an example of an evaluation study. This type of research moves a step closer to meeting the standards set by Patton, Braxton, and their colleagues in the early chapters.

Lessons Learned

This volume introduces an alternative way to think about the role of institutional research in support of institutional improvement and student academic success. Consider the path we are on. Policymakers are introducing new approaches to assessment and finance that reward institutions with high persistence rates (St. John, Kline, and Asker, 2001; Zumeta, 2001). But this systematic approach could turn into a means of rewarding institutions that attract the most able students who can afford to pay the costs of attending. In other words, we need to focus on improving opportunity for new, first-generation college students and others who challenge traditional assumptions about academic success.

To meet the goal of expanding higher education for new generations of first-generation college students, we need to learn about new pathways to success. The concluding chapter summarizes the lessons learned from this initial foray into the use of institutional research to support changes aimed at improving academic success. While the impact of this new venture may be modest, we hope it raises the prospect of change by introducing an alternative approach to technical and research support for reform in higher education.

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Editors

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