

## **Student Satisfaction and Academic Performance in Armenian Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

*Using an ex-post facto, non-experimental approach, this research examined the relationship between student satisfaction and academic performance in Armenian higher education. Data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire from 372 students in nine public and three private 4-year institutions located in different rural and urban areas of Armenia. Statistical analyses revealed significant differences for student satisfaction and academic performance. Students who reported lower satisfaction had lower academic performances.*

### **Introduction**

Examining factors affecting student performance in postsecondary settings is a common practice in Western educational systems. It is intuitive that a strong academic background and skill set is important to college achievement. However, it is commonly believed that a host of other student personal and institutional attributes impacts student attitudes, or their satisfaction with the college experience. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) theorized that an individual's intentions, and thus their behavior, may be predicted by attitudes. From this basis, other researchers have proposed that student satisfaction (attitude) supports their intention to stay in college (intentions), which supports student retention (Keaveney & Young, 1997).

The retention of students is important for fulfilling the primary objectives of educating and graduating students, but also from the standpoint of college enrollment management. It is likely that retaining students already matriculating through a college curriculum is less expensive than recruiting a new student. In a report on undergraduate student recruitment developed by Noel Levitz (2011), it was made apparent that institutions spend a significant amount of money to recruit new students.

Although a considerable amount of research exists on various factors contributing to students' academic performance in Western higher education and its relationship with student retention and graduation, the picture for post-Soviet Union countries is different. Higher education administrators and policy makers in these countries continue making changes and improvements based on their own perspectives, without putting much emphasis on students' feedback. Armenia, being one of the post-Soviet countries, is not different. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country has undergone major educational reforms, first in secondary and later in postsecondary settings. In 2005, Armenia joined the *Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education* (National Information Center for Academic Recognition and Mobility, 2006). A number of reforms have taken place since then, such as establishing a credit scoring system, and the adoption of a system of comparative degrees, just to name a few. Although within the Bologna Process, Armenian higher education faces pressure in reforming and creating more opportunities for its students.

However, consideration of students' feedback and an examination of the factors that affect their academic performance in college still remain secondary concerns. They do not seem to get proper attention from either the government or from academic institutions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between student satisfaction and academic performance in Armenian higher education. The study ensured that all parts of the country are represented in the sample.

### **Literature Review**

Students' academic performance in higher education is affected by various socioeconomic, psychological, and environmental factors (Hijazi & Naqvi, 2006). It is always in the best interest of educators to measure students' academic performance. This allows them to evaluate not only students' knowledge levels but also the effectiveness of their own teaching processes, and perhaps, provide a gauge of student satisfaction.

A number of studies have focused on examining factors that affect student academic performance in higher education (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Saenz, Marcoulides, Junn, & Young, 1999; Valentine, 2003). In 1999, Saenz et al. examined the relationship between college experience and academic performance among minority students in American higher education. Academic performance was measured by students' GPAs and college experience was measured by a number of variables including father's education, friendships with students of diverse backgrounds, dialogue with professors about courses, self-understanding, adequacy of financial resources, involvement in campus life and attendance of campus events, getting advice from friends about college problems, use of library, experience with the educational equity program, et cetera.

A 93-item questionnaire was developed to conduct a survey among at-risk undergraduate students enrolled in an educational equity program in California State University, Fullerton (Saenz et al., 1999). Of the 89 students assigned to the educational equity program during academic year of 1996-97 and surveyed, only 30 students' responses were completed and usable. In addition to questionnaires, information about students' academic performance and demographics were obtained.

Saenz et al. (1999) utilized structural equation modeling techniques, which allowed them to determine the effect of each variable, as well as to test functional relationships between observed and latent variables. The results indicated that some background variables such as adequate financial resources, namely self understanding and father's education resources were positively associated with students' academic performance. It was also reported that academic and social integration variables impacted students' GPAs. The higher the level of their integration, the better their performance. Overall, this study suggested that students' college experience was positively associated with their academic performance. These findings were supported by a later study (Valentine, 2003) at Mississippi State University (MSU).

Using the Mississippi State University Pathfinders Survey (MSUPS), Valentine (2003) conducted empirical research to examine the role of satisfaction in the performance and retention of freshmen students. The purpose of the project was to learn about student satisfaction with MSU and try to improve university services and programs based on the survey findings. The survey instrument consisted of 16 questions that addressed various areas such as reasons for deciding to attend MSU, satisfaction with different aspects of MSU, and the identification of things that students like most and least.

Participants were 811 freshmen enrolled in a general psychology course at MSU (Valentine, 2003). It was reported that 75% of survey participants were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their choice of MSU, classes and instruction, social life, campus life and environment although only 50% of students reported satisfaction with the town of Starkville and academic advising (Valentine, 2003). Results of the ANOVA indicated that five out of six satisfaction dimensions were significantly associated with students' academic performance. Students who had higher satisfaction were performing better academically in comparison to those who reported lower satisfaction. The only satisfaction related question that did not have any impact on students' GPA was satisfaction with the locale of the institution, Starkville. However, this was not the case for students' retention; satisfaction with Starkville along with the other five satisfaction items was significant in relation to retention. Students who reported lower satisfaction were less likely to return MSU and had lower GPAs.

The researcher (Valentine, 2003) also developed a satisfaction index combining six satisfaction related questions in order to investigate the effects of the index on student retention and academic performance. The results of a Chi Square analysis revealed that this satisfaction index was significantly associated with student retention but not on students' GPAs.

Finally, some valuable suggestions were offered for future research in exploring student satisfaction in postsecondary settings. Some of the suggestions were related to the examination of the effects of student-faculty contact, financial policies, and entertainment opportunities provided by institutions for student satisfaction in college (Valentine, 2003).

The review of literature on the impact of various student satisfaction dimensions in relation to students' academic performance indicates that there is indeed significant association between these factors and academic performance. This research built on that literature base, and further examined the relationship between student satisfaction and academic performance in an international postsecondary setting, namely Armenian higher education.

### **Methodology**

Using an ex-post facto, non-experimental approach, this study examined the relationship between student satisfaction and academic performance in Armenian higher education. A self-report questionnaire was utilized to collect data. Participants of the study were 372 students randomly selected from 12 public and private universities located in rural and urban areas of Armenia. The study targeted undergraduate students who were in their 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year.

Students' overall satisfaction with their college experience was measured by item 100 on the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI): "Rate your overall satisfaction with your experience here thus far" (Noel-Levitz, Inc., 1994, p. 3). Students were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their college experience using a 7-point Likert-scale; 1 being "not satisfied at all" and 7 being "very satisfied". Students' academic performance was measured by their current GPA. The Armenian educational system uses either a 100-point scale or a 20-point scale grading system. The 100-point and 20-point scales were adjusted to a 4-point scale GPA for the purposes of this study.

### **Findings**

Data were analyzed using the SPSS (2008) statistical software package. Out of 372 questionnaires received, 355 were accepted and analyses were conducted based on these responses. There were 267 (75.2%) female and 88 (24.8%) male students. The majority of participants were between the age of 19 to 24 (94.1%) and only 5.9% reported being 18 or under. Of the participants, 59.4% were from rural institutions and 40.6% were from urban institutions. As for the institutional type, 275 participants were from public and 80 participants were from private institutions. Academic majors represented in the sample were pre-school, primary and special education, pedagogy and methodology of elementary education, history and jurisprudence, foreign languages and literature, economics, finance, economics and enterprise management, accounting, natural science/information, computer technologies, sports, preliminary military training, journalism, philosophy and psychology, agribusiness and marketing.

ANOVA was utilized to determine significant group differences in relation to student satisfaction. Group mean and standard deviations of the GPA are presented in Table 1. The highest mean GPA score was evident among students who reported being somewhat satisfied (3.39) while the lowest mean score (2.86) was seen among students who were not very satisfied with their college experience.

**Table 1: Group Mean and Standard Deviations for GPA**

Rate your overall satisfaction with your experience here thus far	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
not satisfied at all	3.17	6	.408
not very satisfied	2.86	37	.751
somewhat dissatisfied	3.27	55	.804
neutral	2.97	37	1.013
somewhat satisfied	3.39	104	.829
satisfied	3.38	98	.666
very satisfied	3.06	18	.998
Total	3.25	355	.818

ANOVA findings, which are displayed in Table 2, indicated significant group differences in relation to students' academic performance,  $F(6, 348) = 3.33$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .054$ . In order to determine which satisfaction categories were significantly different, Bonferroni's post hoc test was conducted. Results showed that the grade point average of individuals who were *not very satisfied* with their college experience was significantly different from all other groups at the .05 level. As can also be seen in Table 1, this group had the lowest mean GPA score in comparison to all other groups.

**Table 2: ANOVA Summary Table**

Dependent Variable: Grade Point Average						
Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	ES
Std. satisfaction	12.84	6	2.14	3.33	.003	.054
Error	223.851	348	.643			
Total	3988.000	355				
a. R Squared = .054 (Adjusted R Squared = .038)						

### Summary and Discussion

There are several factors associated with students' academic performance in higher education. One of those factors is their satisfaction with the college experience. Like many other studies (Saenz et al., 1999; Valentine, 2003), this study also found a significant relationship between student satisfaction and academic performance. Armenian students who reported better satisfaction with their overall college experience had higher grade point averages than those with low satisfaction. And it is intuitive that higher academic performance would lead to improved retention and college outcomes.

Given that satisfaction promotes academic performance and improved outcomes, the research agenda and discourse should turn to the capacity of administrators to promote improved student satisfaction. Schreiner (2009) prescribes several actions based on empirical research that, when applied at the campus level for students at various levels of matriculation, are likely to boost satisfaction. In American higher education, it is acknowledged that the reasons students persist in college is quite complex and is attributed to a multitude of variables (Tinto, 1993), though in Armenian higher education students persist in college because the system is highly competitive and does not provide much flexibility. This, however, does not mean that Armenian higher education administrators should not be concerned with factors affecting student satisfaction and academic performance. Once a student drops out of an Armenian college his or her chances of re-enrollment are almost impossible.

Student satisfaction also ultimately impacts the quality of students graduated and placed in the workforce and community. Graduates' quality can become questionable if their academic performance is low. This in turn, can negatively affect the institution's reputation, and create challenges to graduates as they enter the labor force. Furthermore, as noted Armenian education administrators have been slow to incorporate the students' perspective into their leadership strategies. Perhaps it is encouraging to them to know the potential impact, as described in this research, of efforts taken to improve campus climate and culture. It is therefore critical that Armenian higher educational institutions begin gauging student satisfaction in some form. This may prompt them to utilize systematic feedback from students on services and programs offered, with the goal of improving student educational outcomes.

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