

Walden University

College of Education

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Karen Sauer

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Dr. Richard Braley, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Maureen Ellis, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

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Abstract

University Professors' and Department Directors' Perceptions Regarding Support
for Freshman Academic Performance

by

Karen Sauer

MA, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1997

BS, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1993

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

In Chile, 50% of students who enroll in Chilean colleges do not graduate, negatively impacting their families' economic situations as well as national development. The purpose of this qualitative bounded case study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions held by math, English, and general education professors regarding the support provided to freshman students in a program at 1 campus of a private Chilean university. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory emphasizing internal and external motivations and social constructivism theory emphasizing development as a process comprised the conceptual framework. Both theories provide meaningful understanding of the drivers that support students in their learning process. The research questions focused on understanding the support that math, English, and general education professors and directors might provide to freshman students. A purposeful homogeneous sampling was used to identify 9 professors and 3 directors. Data collection involved semistructured interviews, peer debriefing, and member checks to triangulate the data. The findings revealed that the university could benefit from implementing a seminar program to acclimate conditionally admitted students to university studies. A 1-week seminar was developed. This study may contribute to positive social change by influencing professors' and directors' perceptions regarding possibilities for supporting students in improving their academic performance, thereby raising student passing and graduation rates to positively impact national development in Chile.

PREVIEW

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my beloved family, who urged me to never give up and showed me their unconditional patience. Thank you to my husband, Ben, who encouraged me to take the time I required to dedicate to my qualitative research project, ensuring that our family and house were functioning while I was working to obtain this degree. I do appreciate your unselfish commitment with my challenge. I love you and respect you for the enormous support you expressed. I am also grateful for the kind words and affection expressed by my children, David, Ariel, Gabriel, and Dana, who helped me to face this challenge. My hope is that the four of you will be able to realize that perseverance and effort are essential in all you choose to pursue in life. To my parents, Rosa and Norberto, who raised me with the conviction that I can make my dreams come true if I work hard, and who encouraged me to pursue the doctoral degree. And to my grandparents in heaven, who did not have the opportunity to study but whose example taught me the value of becoming a lifelong learner. I love and respect you all, and I am grateful that you accompanied me, physically or spiritually, throughout this academic journey. I will forever be grateful for all the support and confidence you gave me, which were fundamental in enabling me to pursue this degree and to focus on my qualitative doctoral study.

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

In Chile, nearly 50% of students who enroll in higher education programs do not graduate, and 30% of freshman students drop out after their first year of postsecondary education (Mineduc, 2012). Of those who drop out after the first year, 13.4% eventually re-enter the system in the next 3 years. However, 17.2% simply withdraw (Rolando, Salamanca, & Lara, 2012). These trends concern Chilean governmental officials, higher education leaders and educators, as well as the Chilean population in general, because many students who withdraw from the university carry a debt burden they are unable to pay (Blanco, Jerez, & Rolando, 2015; Rojas, Fonseca, & Silva, 2011). Additionally, there are implications for the government, the students, and their families, given that the investment in higher education proved unsuccessful (Mineduc, 2012). Students develop frustration toward education, leading to an outlook that can become a barrier for future learning. Failure to graduate may impede students from achieving social mobility, which would facilitate improvement of their economic conditions (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014) and enhance their social life (Miranda, 2014).

The Local Problem

The local problem addressed in this qualitative case study was how professors and directors of math, English, and general education (MEGE) classes perceive that they can support the freshman students of the economics and business program (EBP) of a private Chilean university (PCU) to improve their academic performance in MEGE courses. This study was conducted at the PCU's largest campus, where 1,850 students studied in the

EBP during the 2015-2016 academic year (AY). At this campus, 50% of the students who enrolled in March 2010 completed their program of study in December 2014 or July 2015 in order to graduate in the December 2015 ceremony. The 2015 *graduating* cohort was composed of 372 students, of whom 255 (68.54%) were from this campus. The 2015-2016 AY *freshman* cohort was composed of 260 freshman students. According to the director of the EBP from that class, 252 freshman students enrolled in March, and eight students enrolled in August. University officials, administrators, and academic staff need to understand MEGE professors' and MEGE directors' opinions and thus improve graduation rates. Furthermore, this qualitative case study may support initiatives to close the knowledge gap between faculty and university leaders concerning the most effective strategy for assisting EBP freshmen on one PCU campus in improving their academic performance in MEGE classes.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

For Chilean university freshmen, satisfactory academic performance is of paramount importance, because those who cannot afford their postsecondary education (Mineduc, 2012; Universia, 2009) are supported by government-guaranteed loans (Ingres, n.d.; Rojas et al., 2011) that are contingent on their academic achievement. Government officials determined that the appropriate measure to control the allocation of state resources to higher education students was students' academic performance (Mineduc, 2014). Accordingly, to retain their loans, students must have passed 70% of the courses in which they were enrolled in the previous year (Mineduc, 2014). The

Chilean government's policy implies that to maintain their loans, students need to commit to their higher education and be willing to make sacrifices to become professionals.

In recognition of the enormous increase in the number of students who were applying for postsecondary education and the changes in their income profiles, the Chilean government improved its strategy for funding allocations. Consequently, the government developed a system to support those students who cannot afford enrollment or tuition fees. According to Blanco et al. (2015), 52% of the students who were enrolled to study at institutions of higher learning in 2014 received some tuition benefits. Nevertheless, 30% of freshman students drop out after their first year of postsecondary education. Of those students who forsake their university studies, 13.4% re-enter the system within the next 3 years, whereas 17.2% never return (Rolando et al., 2012). According to Chilean laws, students who receive loans guaranteed by the state must be able to repay their loans, regardless of whether they re-enroll.

Chilean higher education students face many challenges that may negatively affect their academic development and delay the completion of their professional degrees. The most significant challenges these students must overcome include inadequate academic preparation, scarcity of economic resources that compels them to work while attending university courses, and lack of knowledge regarding appropriate strategies for learning and studying. All of these factors prevent students from fully committing to their studies.

PCU faculty realized the importance of identifying, assessing, and understanding the primary factors that prevent students from graduating on time. An understanding of the significant obstacles that prevent students from graduating enabled PCU administration to develop appropriate strategies to support students in their learning process. Consequently, Chilean higher education students may have the possibility of minimizing the time required to obtain their degrees (Flynn, 2014; Meulenbroek & van den Bogaard, 2013; Zelkowski & Goodykoontz, 2013).

According to the director of the EBP the PCU faculty leaders became aware of the need for assessing and understanding MEGE professors' perceptions of how they can support freshman students in achieving successful academic performance in MEGE courses. Furthermore, the data provided by this study may spur university administrators and academics to develop important tools to enable students to improve their academic performance in MEGE courses.

Evidence of the Problem From the Professional Literature

The development and growth of a country's economy hinge, to a great extent, on the spread of knowledge that occurs in institutions of higher learning (Christofides, Hoy, Milla, & Stengos, 2015). Postsecondary students should internalize higher education knowledge and develop the skills required to improve quality of life in their communities. Higher education students' new behavior of responsibility and commitment should provide social benefits to their countries (Mishra, 2015). The number of students enrolling in Chilean postsecondary institutions has grown steadily over the last 25 years (Blanco et al., 2015), yet education officials are concerned because each student cohort

exhibits weaker preparation than the ones before (Sandoval-Lucero, 2014). Therefore, higher education officials should strive to improve the development of each student's learning process (Basitere & Ivala, 2015; Schnee, 2014).

Much of the literature on the students' academic weaknesses subject advocates for ways in which university freshmen can improve their own academic performance and calls for faculty to support the development of each student to minimize dropout and withdrawal rates (Datray, Saxon, & Martirosyan, 2014; Núñez-Peña, Bono, & Suárez-Pellicioni, 2015; Sandoval-Lucero, 2014). The major challenges and the efficiency indicators of postsecondary institutions are retention and graduation on time (Ilgan, 2013; Summers, Acee, & Ryser, 2015). However, one additional concern for postsecondary institutions appears to be student withdrawal or nonattendance due to negative social, economic, and personal factors (Blanco et al., 2015).

Attendance improves students' learning opportunities and is key to achieving successful academic performance (Núñez-Peña et al., 2015; Termos, 2013). Additionally, increased attendance rates improve completion rates (Flynn, 2014; Zelkowski & Goodykoontz, 2013). Altogether, a negative relationship is also noted regarding class absenteeism (Arulampalam, Naylor, & Smith, 2012), student anxiety, and student performance (Amiri & Ghonsooly, 2015). As nonattendance rises, performance falls. The literature reviewed for this study supports the observation that Chilean freshman students face significant challenges in pursuing higher academic degrees.

Definitions

The following terms and definitions are used throughout this study.

Academic performance: This is the measure of students' knowledge (Basitere & Ivala, 2015).

Absenteeism: The measurement of the number of classes a student skips; an “indicator of student motivation” (Summers et al., 2015, p. 149).

Attendance: Student presence and participation in face-to-face classes, which “allows students to obtain information that is not contained in textbooks or lecture materials presented online but also allows students varied contact with material (lectures, review of notes, demonstrations, etc.)” (Crede, Roch, & Kieszczynka, 2010, p. 273).

Failing grade: The grade evaluation that indicates a student did not learn the required topics during the semester. In Chile, grades are ranked from 1.0 to 7.0 (1.0 is the worst, and 7.0 is the best), and a failing grade is under 4.0 (Unab, 2012).

Class sections: The “center of the student's college academic experience” (Zumbrunn, McKim, Buhs, & Hawley, 2014, p. 662).

Freshman students: Students who are enrolled in and attending their first academic year at university (Summers et al., 2015).

Completion time: The amount of time that students need to pass all of the courses of the curriculum (Blanco et al., 2015).

Passing grade: The grade required for students to pass a class. In Chile, grades are ranked from 1.0 to 7.0 (1.0 is the worst, and 7.0 is the best), and the passing grade is above 4.0 (Unab, 2012).

Peer mentors: According to D'Angelo and Epstein (2014), these are select trained students who assist faculty by supporting fellow students.

Persistence: Behavior of a student who remains “in the courses through the final exam” (Zelkowski & Goodykoontz, 2013, p. 208) or in the university until graduation.

Retention rate: This is defined as the ratio between students entering college and the number of those same students who remain as students at the institution in the following years (Rolando et al., 2012).

Successful academic performance: Results of the continuous quality improvement students implement in their learning processes (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014), defined by grades ranging from 4.0 to 7.0 (Unab, 2012).

Students: Undergraduate learners enrolled at the university to study and earn a professional degree (Unab, 2012).

Withdrawal rates: The proportion of students who leave courses or the university (Núñez-Peña et al., 2015, p. 81).

Significance of the Study

Currently, Chileans require university degrees in order to improve their economic standards of living. Furthermore, Chilean government officials state that students need to pass 70% of the courses in which they were enrolled during the previous year in order to retain the financial support that the Chilean government allocates to higher education students. Additionally, higher education generates the aspiration of social mobility in Chilean students (Blanco et al., 2015).

The gap between theory and practice addressed by this qualitative case study was EBP officials' lack of knowledge concerning the perceptions of MEGE professors and MEGE directors concerning support for EBP freshman students at one PCU campus in

order to improve students' academic performance in MEGE classes. A qualitative research approach was an appropriate methodology to provide the necessary detailed data.

The results of this qualitative case study may be applied to improve the academic performance of EBP students at this specific PCU campus. Additionally, PCU faculty leaders may employ the results of this study to develop new strategies to enhance student attendance, persistence, and retention rates. Finally, the PCU may employ the results of this study to develop and promote the use of teaching and learning methodologies and pragmatic activities that enhance students' learning processes, improve students' class attendance rates, and improve the university's retention rates (Summers et al., 2015).

Research Questions

This qualitative case study addressed the support that freshman students require in order to improve their academic performance in MEGE courses. Closing the gap between theory and practice may provide key data to assist EBP freshman students in building greater confidence in their capacity to improve their grades in all of the classes in which they are enrolled and should be attending.

The research questions guiding this case study were as follows:

- RQ1: What are the perceptions of the MEGE professors and MEGE directors at one PCU campus regarding how they can support the freshman students in the EBP to improve their academic performance in MEGE courses?
- RQ2: What are the perceptions of the MEGE professors and MEGE directors at one PCU campus regarding the additional academic support services the

university might provide EBP freshman students to improve their academic performance in MEGE courses?

The following subquestion supported RQ2:

SQ: What academic knowledge will EBP freshmen need to improve their academic performance and be successful in MEGE courses?

The first goal of this case study was to identify whether the MEGE professors and MEGE directors were willing to assist freshman students. In pursuing this first purpose, I sought to appraise whether the MEGE professors felt prepared to support the EBP freshman students in improving their academic performance in MEGE courses and to assess their level of enthusiasm for such support. The second goal was to explore whether professors and directors believed that the university provided them with the necessary tools to support freshman students. Understanding how to improve students' performance in MEGE courses and identifying which academic support tools students prefer may enhance university students retention and graduation rates.

Review of Literature

For the literature review, I examined the perceptions that professors hold regarding the major challenges that impact freshman students' academic performance at a university. I searched ERIC, Education Research Complete, SAGE Premier, ProQuest Central, and Thoreau, using the following terms: *attendance rates*, *freshmen*, *university*, *professors' perceptions*, *absenteeism*, and *improving academic performance*. I also used Boolean searches on related words such as *millennial*, *students*, *college*, *higher education*, and *academics*. These terms supported the data gathering process.