

African American Student Retention

Student Perceptions of Success Factors

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Abstract: This study seeks to establish the factors that contribute to low retention rates among African American males in higher education by examining student perceptions on achievement and challenges to retention and matriculation. The study also hopes to distinguish these factors along academic and social lines and identify what resources are essential to student success.

Topical Introduction and Research Questions

Higher education institutions are increasingly pressured to diversify their student body and many have been successful in doing so. “Either as a result of litigation or federal mandate, most higher education institutions . . . , have produced affirmative action, desegregation or diversity plans that spell out in detail how they are to go about the task of achieving diversity.” (Matthews, p.27, 2006) Still, many underrepresented groups are not succeeding at comparable levels and “while colleges and universities are developing a wide array of retention strategies to address specific groups within their student population, they should pay attention to gender divisions among underrepresented minorities.” (Roach, 2008) The retention rates of African American male students on college campuses across the nation are declining, “college completion rates for African Americans between the ages of 25-29 stood at only 16%.” (US Student Association Foundation, 2006) and “there's a great concern that the low retention of Black males on college campuses accounts for a significant part of the graduation rate disparity between Blacks and Whites at many places.” (Roach, 2008)

It is worthwhile to examine some of the factors that lead to many African American males leaving school prior to obtaining a degree and explore institutions where African American student achievement is relatively prosperous. Misra & McMahon (2006) explain the social infrastructure at a campus often is not able to support campus diversity goals. Campus administration, the surrounding community, on-campus racial issues, and financial obstacles can dictate the ability of students of diverse backgrounds to succeed. This study seeks to establish the factors that contribute to low retention rates among African American males in higher education by examining student perceptions on achievement and challenges to retention and matriculation.

The study also hopes to distinguish these factors along academic and social lines and identify what resources are essential to student success. In doing so, the researcher hopes to address, whether a student's previous educational background indicates a potential for success or failure at the collegiate level? What resources are available to African American students and are the students taking advantage of them? Does a student's level of comfort on a campus contribute to their success and/or failure?

Theoretical Framework

Many scholars and their research have been dedicated to the concept of student retention on college campuses and it is important to ground this study with an appropriate theoretical framework. Vincent Tinto (1975, 1982, and 1993) is a preeminent researcher on higher education dropouts and he proposes an interactionist theory of college student departure. With concessions for other economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological theoretical perspectives that have been advanced to describe the higher education departure enigma. For many institutions of higher education, student retention is a major point of emphasis. Several factors exist that are impactful on the entire student population with regard to matriculation and retention as Tinto (1975) observes, students enter higher education with various individualized and personal traits that play a role in the college student departure process. They include elements from the family background, individual characteristics, and previous academic experiences. Family background traits include socioeconomic status, parental educational attainment, and parental expectations. Individual traits recognized by Tinto (1993) are academic ability, gender, and race. Previous academic experiences include the characteristics of the student's prior school experience and a record of high school scholarly achievement.

With the current economic climate, many institutions are attempting to develop innovative ways to increase student retention from year-to-year and matriculation towards degrees rather than lose students to other institutions or complete drop outs. Misra and McMahon (2006) highlight a sense of belonging as a contributor to student academic success and believe it is the role of the institution to foster this sense of belonging among its student base. This is developed through “a series of activities that provide academic as well as social integration for the students. It is only when they feel part of the educational institution that they can be expected to want to stay there and participate in the educational process.” (Misra & McMahon, p.41, 2006) Placing an onus on the institution to cultivate these connections is indicative of the expanded social capabilities of academia. Many resources are devoted toward student achievement and academic success in order to ensure, not only quality of education, but also an accessible learning environment conducive to goal achievement. Likewise, student life and cultural initiatives and programs aid in the social development of students, contribute to the comfort of students, and provide a sense of belonging to the campus. More specifically, Misra and McMahon (2006) believe that the establishment of a learning community on campus serves to foster retention by addressing student characteristics at entry to the collegiate level through academic and social integration that develops a sense of belonging.

Methodology

Procedures

In order to sufficiently gauge the impact of potential contributing factors of student success, this study incorporates a mixed methods structure of research. Qualitative research models are used to demonstrate a relationship between the independent variables (contributing factors) and the

dependent variable (student success). This is accomplished through an analysis of a series of panel discussions with African American students at a Small Midwestern College (SMC) in south-central Michigan. Quantitative research approach is used to analyze a survey of students at SMC and graduation completion rates. Each of these instruments focuses on student perceptions of academic and social methods of integration that are designed to stimulate opportunities for success.

The panel discussions were facilitated by a researcher who directed the interaction around three major questions regarding collegiate education and African American student retention: Why are you in college? What keeps you in school? What gets you to succeed? Students were recruited by campus wide email invitations and through contact with leading fraternity organizations on campus. The participants consisted of a racially diverse group of mostly male students who were members of the leading fraternity organizations. The three discussion opportunities were held in a large conference room, with students grouped around tables, or in a semi-circle to foster interaction. Each session was videotaped with students all signing consent forms. Student names were changed to protect their identity.

The student survey focused on student perceptions of prior academic preparation, perception of campus climate, awareness and use of academic resources, and the role/importance of participation in student organizations. The format followed the Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree survey model with separate sections that were meant to gauge awareness and participation with campus programs and organizations. Additionally, short answer space was provided to allow for qualitative responses to organizational questions.

Furthermore, statistical analysis of student achievement at SMC (which is provided to Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems for accreditation purposes) and, at the national level, data from the US Student Association Foundation is included to show comparative achievement among racial demographics.

Approach

A qualitative approach is effective for this study due to the subjective and personal nature of the data being collected. In order for a participant in this study to feel comfortable enough to discuss personal academic, socio-economic, and cultural aspects, a secure interactive experience was developed with the researchers to ensure privacy. Additionally, this qualitative research project focuses on the environmental and contextual factors that assume accuracy in reflecting the reality of the SMC community-specifically the perspective of African American students on campus by allowing members of that community to speak to issues and experiences that are unique to their point of view. Furthermore, a qualitative approach allows for identification of similar processes that are indicative of goal achievement and, conversely, identification of processes that lead to failure.

The quantitative analysis approach to the survey and graduation rate data allows for an establishment of themes and patterns regarding student perceptions of their prior academic preparation, awareness and use of campus academic resources, the impact of the campus climate, and participation in student organizations. The survey results reflect the responses of 29 SMC undergraduate students during the Spring of 2009. The numerical data on graduation rates was compiled by US Student Association Foundation and Small Midwestern College.

Data Analysis

Qualitative

The panel discussion series was divided into three forums. The initial forum was guided by two thematic questions: Where have you been? Where are you now? Specifically, the facilitator inquired about student expectations and competency prior to attending Small Midwestern College and subsequent competency and challenges once arriving on campus. Student expectations of the college experience are described as: expecting it to be tougher than high school, freedom from parental restrictions, life style shifts, opportunity to mature, partying/socializing.

“I expected it to be a lot more heavier; I’m used to high school, and have a planner set up with my schedule.”- Jonathan

Regarding student academic expectations, six of the participants openly admitted that their previous academic experience had not adequately prepared them for college level English, math, science. However, half of those students admitted that time management could be a factor in their struggles in college. Conversely, three students felt their prior academic experiences rendered them competent at the collegiate level in core subject areas. Interestingly though, half of the participants considered their previous research experience commiserate with the college level.

“I went to community college before coming here so I handled some of the academic requirements before I got here.”- Trevor

“I think it depends on how well your high school prepared you. When you get to fourth year in college and 400 level classes, they are hard but it depends on how well you’re prepared.”- Paul

“I came from Flint Southwestern high school. The longest paper I ever wrote was 6 pages. When I got here 10/12 pages is the norm.”- Dante

Discussion regarding challenges upon arriving on campus included the majority of students recognizing that time management is a significant attribute that needs to be developed in order to ensure success at the college level.

“It comes down to figuring out when you should do homework, when to study, or when chill out or start more work.”-Paul

Other acknowledged challenges included: parties, money, stress over family issues, car issues, tuition loans, stereotyping, and walking into a class with only one black person and 12 white people.

“The hardest challenge is handling all the obstacles and handling them positively and balancing everything you have to do.”- Ahmad

“I see the biggest challenge staying focused and seeing the big picture.”
-Ray

The second discussion forum focused on the following questions: Do you feel comfortable at Small Midwestern College? How would you describe social relations at SMC? Do these relations impact your academic success? What resources are available at SMC? Do you take advantage of these resources? What resources would you like to see at SMC?

The discussions of campus comfort centered on an overwhelming majority of participants agreeing that Small Midwestern College is a comfortable place to get an education, meet and socialize with others, and develop lasting relationships with students and faculty. Several responded that the campus is largely a friendly place where strangers are willing to help and that friends are never too far away.

Social relations at SMC were categorized as racial/ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or religious. Participants were eager to discuss the racial/ethnic climate at SMC and described several instances where racial/ethnic conflict was negligible and integration widely accepted on campus. Members of the fraternities each acknowledged the benefits of belonging to a multicultural organization. Two participants discussed being concerned about low academic expectations for African-Americans from other students and/or faculty. Additionally, a recent campus controversy involved an African-American academic achievements display versus an All-Campus display- several students felt it important to acknowledge African-American achievement separately. The only negatively impactful area of racial/ethnic relations was described during encounters with members of the surrounding community- neighbors, business owners, and township police. Minimal concern was expressed regarding relations on campus with gender, sexual orientation or religious implications. Most students did not feel that any of these relation issues impacted their ability to be academically successful.

The discussion of campus resources involved students outlining the major academic support programs available at the institution. Academic advising, tutoring, and the Learning & Student Success Center were each identified as resources that students were highly familiar with. One student explained the purpose and assistance available in the center for Disability Services. The campus writing center was highlighted as being very beneficial to student success and each resource was claimed to be taken advantage of by at least six students. Enhanced academic advising and a freshmen seminar were both decidedly emphasized as resources that either needs improvement or implementation. Several students cited the Multicultural Office as a resource.

The final session engaged the students in a discussion on post-graduate opportunities, job search preparation, and career pathways.

Quantitative

The results of the student survey reflected the responses of 29 Small Midwestern College students. Only 17.1% of respondents were Freshmen, 37.9% identified as Sophomores, 31% identified as Juniors, and 13.7% identified as Seniors. Fourteen respondents identified as Journalism/Mass Communication, Criminal Justice, and Fitness Management majors; Four respondents identified as Insurance or Business majors; Three respondents identified as Biology or pre-med backgrounds.

In consideration of Prior Academic preparation, most students agreed that they were previously prepared for college academics. Prior preparation in English received the largest agreed upon responses (24) identifying the peak self-reported strength; while preparation for college research received the largest disagreed upon responses (11) establishing the greatest self-reported weakness. (See Figure 2)

Participants all agreed or strongly agreed that they were comfortable at SMC and that the college has a positive campus climate. 62% of respondents believe that their academic performance is impacted by campus climate. 86% of respondents disagreed with the statement that race relations on campus were tense. (See Figure 2) 97% of respondents believed that participation in campus organizations was important to their development as a student. The majority of participants (78%) are members of a Greek society and/or athletic team. (See Figure 3)

Participant responses regarding campus resources is illustrated by significantly more students being aware of academic resources than are actually reporting using them. 70% of responders used the Learning and Student Success Center, academic advising or tutoring services. Only 10% reported using the Disability Services. (See Figure 4)

The retention rates of African American male students on college campuses across the nation are declining, “college completion rates for African Americans between the ages of 25-29 stood at only 16%.” (US Student Association Foundation, 2006) At SMC, that number is slightly higher where underrepresented minorities, as members of a full-time undergraduate cohort, received degrees at a rate of 29% in 2002. This trend is actually in a downturn as the period of 1996-1999 held graduation rates for underrepresented minorities at an average of 36.75% annually. The above average graduation rates for underrepresented minorities at SMC extended to male students as well- in 2002, the number was 32%. (Small Midwestern College, 2009) Still SMC has capacity to increase the percentage of Africa American students matriculating through degree programs, even though it is, indeed, higher than the national average.

Discussion

"There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence" (Tinto, 1993, p. 71).

“I think success is sometimes determined by personality. If you have a strong desire to succeed, you will.”- Jason

Where Tinto (1975) describes individual and personal traits as key to the college student departure decision, participants in the study also indicated individualized characteristics as motivators toward matriculation. Students at SMC recognized personal achievement, skill

development and financial independence as reasons for enrolling and staying in college. Tinto (1975) details family background as an indicator for college student achievement. Students demonstrated a desire to be the first in their family to attend and graduate from college, set a trend for future generations, or take care of their young children as stimulus for scholarly achievement. Tinto (1975) also alludes to parental expectations as a contributor to college student departure, and students were keenly aware of their parent's expectations for success, specifically regarding tuition payments and/or loan payments.

Tinto (1993) points to previous academic experiences as input into college student departure decisions. The students observed in the discussion forums all maintained that previous academic experiences and exposures were essential in relating competency at the college level. Several pointed to community college preparation as vital to their academic development, while others were either thankful for challenging high school courses or remorseful for less than effective core subject courses when compared to college level experiences.

Misra & McMahon (2006) draw a connection between a developed sense of belonging on a campus to student achievement. The majority of students observed recognized their campus as having a positive climate and described their experience as comfortable. Furthermore, students supported this concept with a near consensual acceptance of the notion that participation in student organizations was important to their development as a student. Student organization participation generally came in the form of Greek society and/or athletic teams and clubs, but also included residence life, co-curricular activities, and professional/honor societies.

Misra & McMahon (2006) also affirmed a belief that an institution is responsible for creating and developing not only social, but academic activities that foster student success. The students

in this study were able to recognize several campus resources that were established by the institution with the aim to increase student achievement. Awareness of these programs was high and included not only tutoring, but also multi-cultural opportunities and academic advising. However, many students, while aware of the resources were not fully taking advantage of all the opportunities to enhance their academic development.

Conceptual Model

This study seeks to establish the factors that contribute to low retention rates among African American males in higher education by examining student perceptions on achievement and challenges to retention and matriculation. To this end, a conceptual model (see Figure 1) was devised that took into account several key factors to student achievement- specifically, Preparedness, Campus Resources, and Campus Comfort.

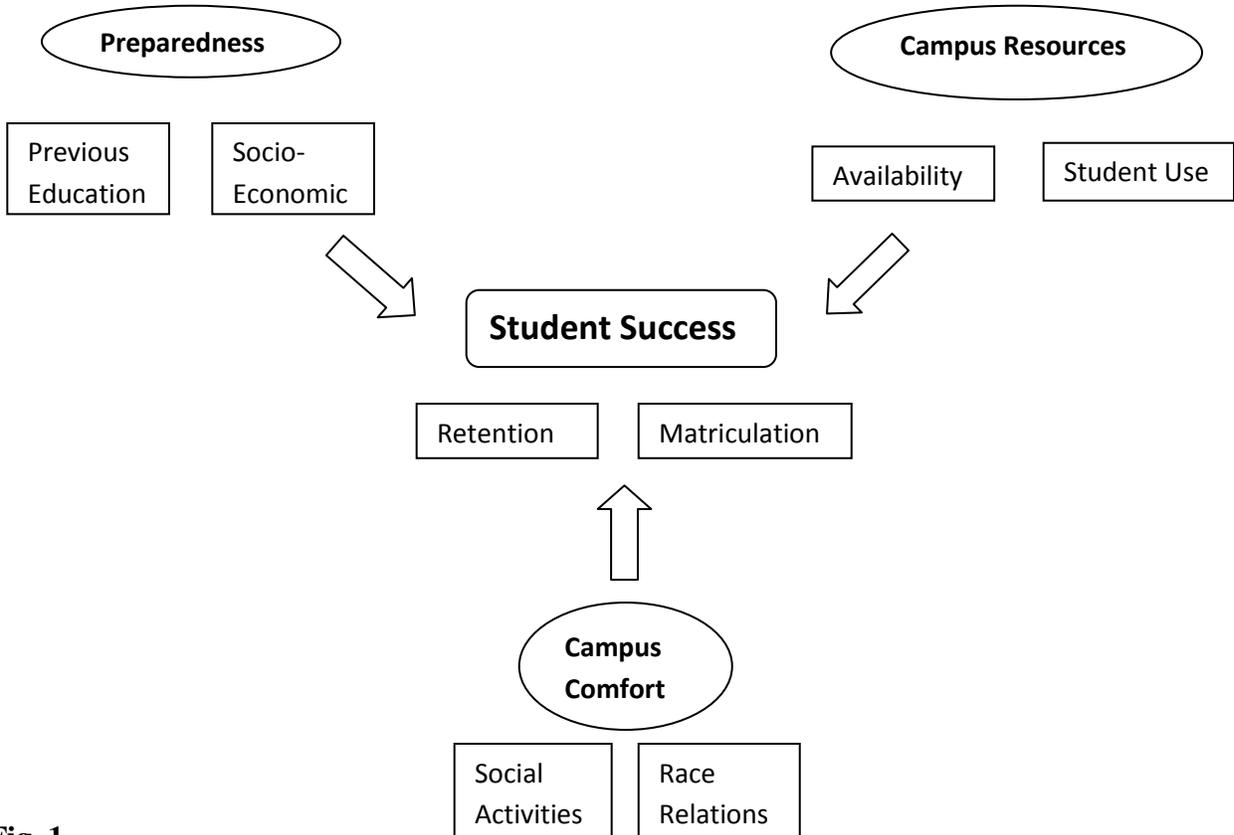


Fig. 1

Preparedness includes those academic and socio-economic attributes that have either, enabled successful students who possess them to achieve in higher learning, or hindered students lacking in these characteristics by delaying or failing to complete their degree program. Academic attributes include, but are not limited to, the quality of primary and secondary education a student received prior to attending a higher education institution; exposure to research, writing, mathematical, and reading expectations at the postsecondary level; experience with educational technology tools and programs; development of proficient time management and study skills; and an ability to navigate the institutional system. Preparedness in relation to socio-economic attributes relates typically to a student's ability to afford the cost of attending college- tuition, room and board, books, fees, miscellaneous costs, etc. However, it increasingly has expanded to include travel costs to and from a distant home, and family financial obligations. Additionally, a student's socio-economic background may also restrict their exposure to important historical, cultural, and economic concepts that are accepted as universal among other members of the campus population.

Campus Resources refers to the tools, programs, and initiatives sponsored by a particular higher education institution or any affiliated organization that are aimed at improving or maintaining student academic success. On many campuses, these programs include academic advising- where coursework, curriculum plans, and degree requirements are explained and discussed, academic resources- where tutoring, research, test taking and writing workshops are offered, and where tools for students with diagnosed learning disabilities are coordinated. In the conceptual model, Campus Resources also refers to a student's willingness to access these tools, programs and initiatives and a corresponding responsibility to follow-up on recommendations and advisement.

Campus Comfort is a much more subjective category in terms of its impact on student achievement. It includes school sponsored and recognized student activities and organizations- sports, clubs, Greek, Professional, and Honor societies, and other co-curricular activities.

Campus Comfort also refers to informal social groups that develop through academic relationships and community organizations that are not officially affiliated with the academic institution. Furthermore, Campus Comfort, with regard to the success of African American student success can also include the presence of a Multicultural Affairs Office or the climate of racial tensions that exist on campus-either at the micro or macro level.

Conclusion

In this study we examined the contributing factors to African American student success as defined by retention and matriculation. This was accomplished through engaging with the student perspective, which allowed for real time insight into matters of higher education. At the institutional level, we were able to observe academic preparation, campus climate, and campus resources as they all relate to student success. This study could prove to be beneficial for institutional administrators as they continue to develop both retention and diversification strategies. This research study is limited by its scope because the focus is on one specific institution and its findings may not be applicable in other settings. Small Midwestern College's retention rate among African American students is already higher than national averages, which could potentially indicate an anomaly in reference to other higher education institutions.

Additionally, the subjective nature of the topic neglects to take into account intrinsic achievement variables such as perseverance and work ethic. This neglect fails to recognize the

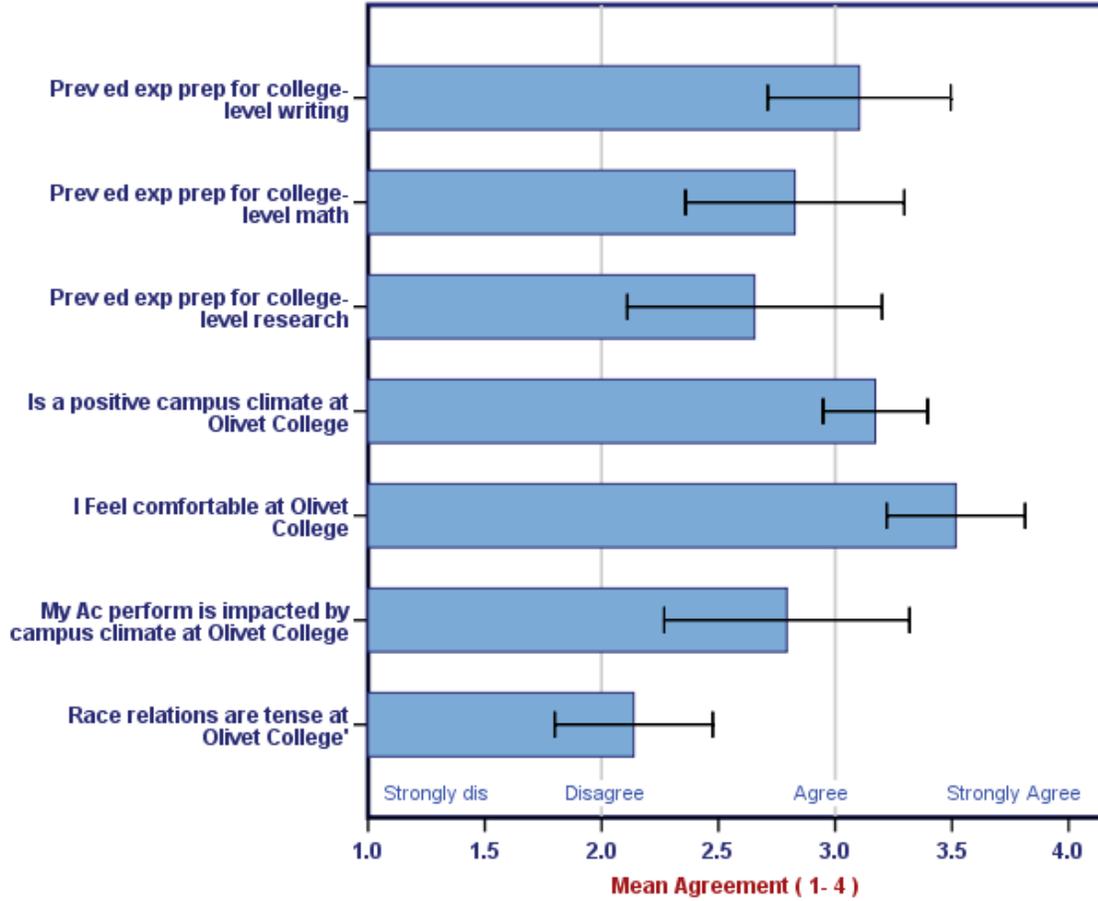
impact such variables have on the participant's ability to counteract some of the negative connotations from the academic, social, and environmental challenges they encounter.

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Appendices:

Preparation for studies and campus climate by selected Olivet College students, Spring 2009



Error bars: 99.6% CI; allows six comparisons safely April 23 2009

Figure 2.

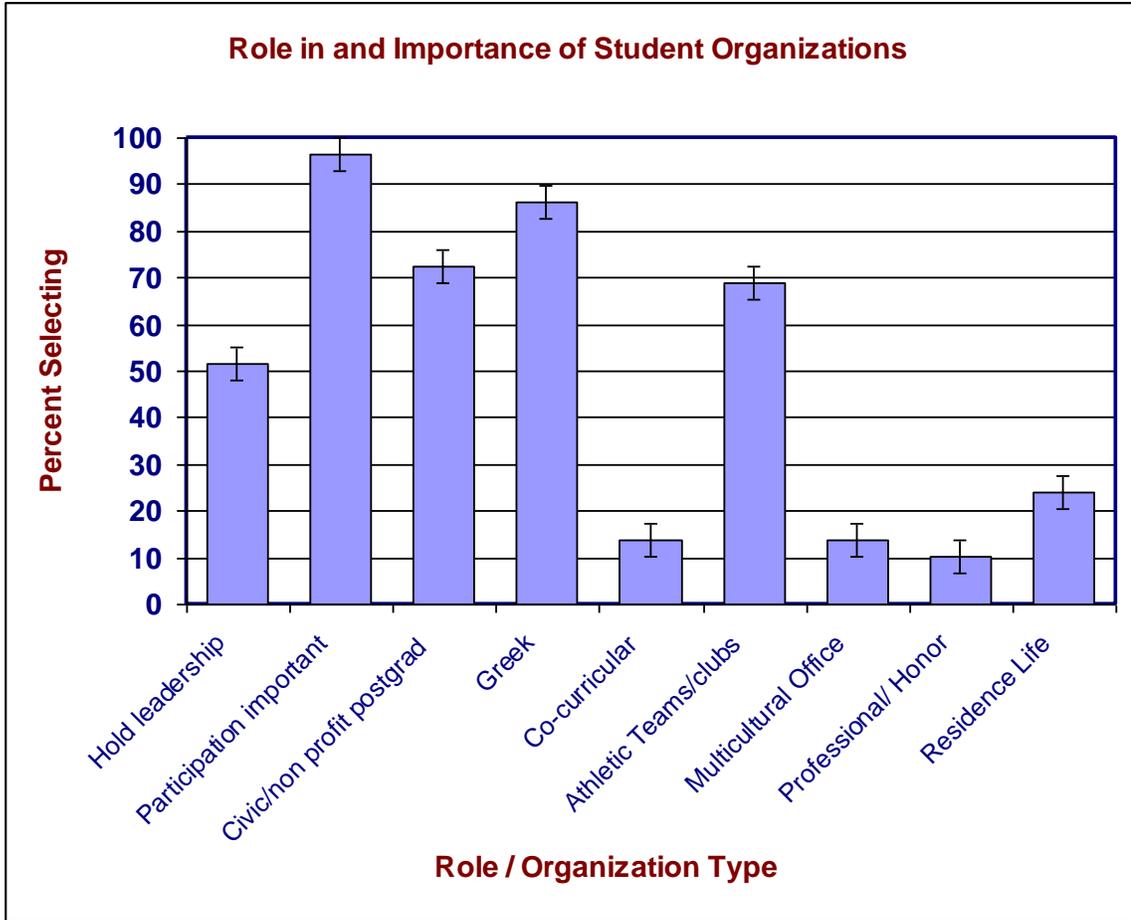
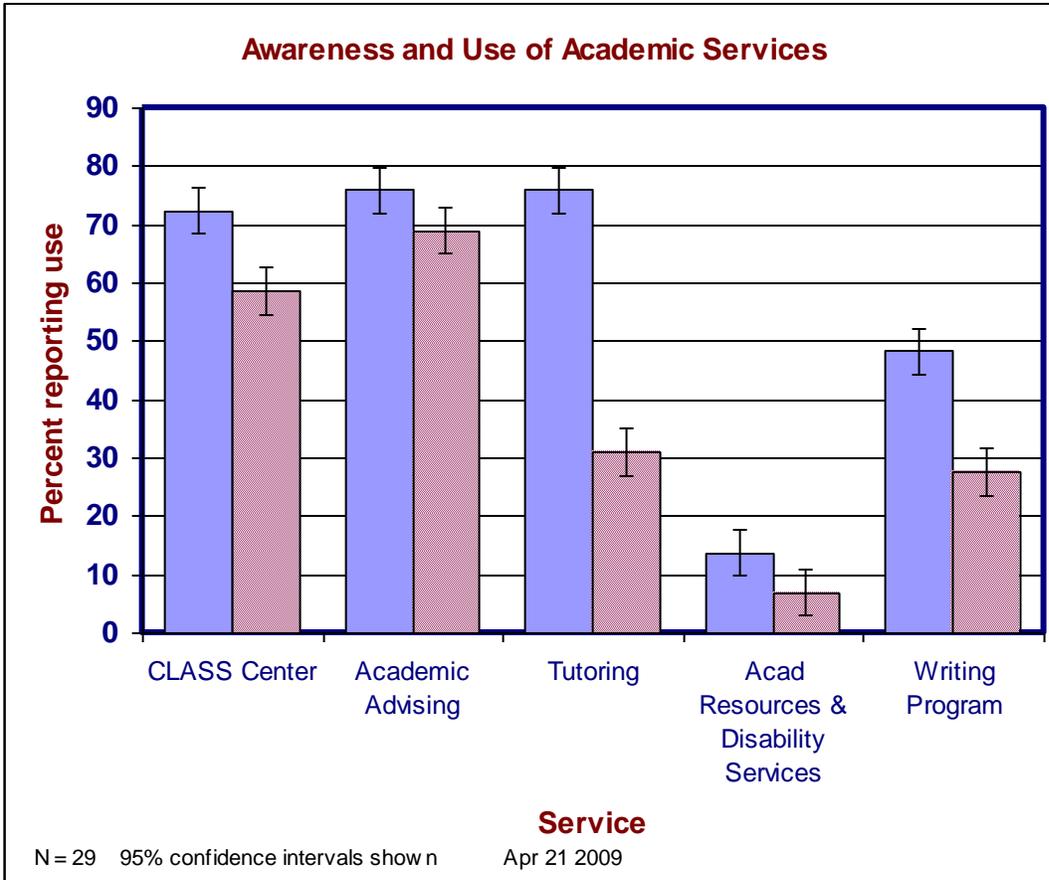


Figure 3.



Awareness is plotted in the solid bars; reported use is plotted in the striped bars.

Figure 4.

Olivet College

Student Survey

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Your previous educational experience prepared you for college level writing.				
Your previous educational experience prepared you for college level math.				
Your previous educational experience prepared you for college level research.				
There is a positive campus climate at Olivet College.				
You feel comfortable at Olivet College.				
Your academic performance is impacted by the campus climate at Olivet College.				
Race relations at Olivet College are tense.				

Campus Resources:

Please circle the campus academic resources that you are aware of.

Comet Learning and Student Success (CLASS) Center

Academic Advising

Tutoring Academic Resources & Disability Services

Writing Program

Please circle the campus academic resources that you have taken advantage of.

Comet Learning and Student Success (CLASS) Center Academic Advising

Tutoring Academic Resources & Disability Services Writing Program

What resources that are currently not offered would you like to see available at Olivet College?

Extracurricular Activities:

Do you hold a leadership position in a campus organization i.e. president, vice-president, treasurer, etc.?

Please circle Yes or No

How many campus organizations are in an active member in? _____

Do you feel like participation in campus organizations is important to your development as a student?

Please circle Yes or No

Do you envision yourself participating in civic organizations and/or non-profits after you graduate from college? ***Please circle Yes or No***

Do you feel that participation in student leadership opportunities and/or campus organizations help you develop any of the skills below. Check all that apply.

_____ Effectively work with individuals from diverse backgrounds

_____ Improve time-management skills

- _____ Improve team-working abilities i.e. delegating tasks, negotiating, listening
- _____ Improve communication skills in large groups and public forums
- _____ Identify talents in others
- _____ Navigate political environments i.e. campus politics

What is your perception of participating in campus organizations? Do you think that participation in campus organizations helps you to develop career related skills?

Are there organizations on campus that you considered joining but decided not to?

If so, what were your reasons for not seeking membership?

Which social activities do you think have positively contributed to your comfort level at Olivet College?

Please circle all that apply.

Greek Societies

Athletic Teams/ Clubs

Professional/Honor Societies

Co-Curricular

Multicultural Office

Residence Life

Race/Ethnicity: _____ Year in
School: _____

G.P.A.: _____ Major/Area of
Study: _____