

ABSTRACT

The retention of students has long been a focus of administrators of higher education institutions. The voluntary withdrawal of students represents a significant loss of time and money for both schools and students. The issues of retention and attrition have been explored extensively over the preceding decades, yet the problem of voluntary withdrawal within the autistic student community remains. Previous studies have examined the issue from many angles utilizing many theoretical constructs. One of the more prominent theories concerning this student exodus is that of Vincent Tinto (1993), who theorized that a lack of social and academic integration contributed to voluntary student withdrawal. However, as many autistic students lack the necessary skills to engage successfully with others in a social / school setting (National Autism Society, 2015), Tinto's work on retention will not be useful in designing a study of autistic students.

The aim of this research study was an examination of the factors involved in the retention of college students (adults) with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This study applied William Glasser's (1998) choice theory, which explores behavior based on the internal motivation to succeed to the problem of autistic college student retention, and explored the relationships among need satisfaction, demographic factors, and retention.

This study assessed the strength of basic needs fulfillment satisfaction in autistic college students, and examined predictive relationships associated with the retention of this growing population of students that can serve as a model for others to consider.

This study featured a survey of the Interactive Autism Network's (IAN) pre-screened autistic participants. This survey utilized the Student Needs Survey (SNS) developed by Burns, Vance, Szadokierski, and Stockwell (2006). Given a four to one male to female diagnosis rate and the fact that autism is present in all classes and races of society, controls for age, gender,

ethnicity, residency status, household income, curriculum, and the highest undergraduate grade level achieved were utilized.

The survey results and subsequent data analysis found significance in four areas: the individual covariates of age, special curriculum, and living alone, and the independent variable of Power. The results indicated that those autistic students who were in the 45-64 age groups, those with access to a special curriculum, those able to live alone, and those able to match their educational life to their Quality World would have the greatest chance of graduating.

Autism, as a developmental disorder or a neurological difference, may delay the development of skills such as communication. However, autism does not prevent a person from changing and maturing over time. Tasks that may have been impossible in early life can become routine as one becomes older (Hoerricks, 2016). By the time autistic people are 40 - 60 years of age, they tend to have more awareness of their unique needs and can control and plan for meeting those needs much more effectively than they could as children (Endow, 2015).

In terms of access to a special curriculum or other accommodations, students transitioning directly from a supportive K-12 environment to an unsupported college environment may experience difficulties, particularly those who have been in special education programs (Wiorkowski, 2015). Unsupported autistic students often fall behind academically in college, as K-12 special education programs often do not teach the basic skills needed for a more rigorous class schedule. Autistic students coming from these programs may have particular difficulty with science, math, and English (Wiorkowski, 2015).

In a general sense, living alone / independently gives individuals the ability to focus on what they like to do and to have control over their home environments (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Palmer, 2006, Wiorkowski, 2015). The modification of one's environment is the most

frequent recommendation in accommodating sensory issues (Richey, 2009). Part of the ability to control the living environment is the ability to create a safe and calm space. Sensory processing problems and anxiety are generally comorbid with autism (Lipsky, 2009, 2011). Wiorkowski (2015) noted that, even for those living in a dormitory, having a private room meant that autistic students had a place to which to retreat when they felt overwhelmed or were simply finished with social interaction.

The needs fulfillment profile of Power revolves more around personal self-worth than does power over others. This need is related to a personal sense of competence, ability, and recognition of value that can come from accomplishment and recognition. It is connected to the idea of the quality world and one's ability to achieve goals. The need for power is also the need to feel in control of one's life. Many autistic people have developed a special interest in a topic that may be pursued at college. They may arrive in class knowing more about the subject than the instructor does. In their quality world, they are an expert on the subject. Feelings of powerlessness can occur when the student is not allowed flexibility to complete assignments when there is a dispute over facts or procedures with the instructor, or when communication issues complicate student / teacher / peer interactions.

This study contributes vital data to the study of autistic college students' attrition. The results can be applied to the greater population of autistic students as schools and administrators who seek to transform their institutions into a welcoming place that attracts and retains this dynamic group of learners.