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Examining Mattering, Spiritual Mattering, and First-Year Retention at a Private, Religiously-Affiliated Institution of Higher Education

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this project was to explore how Schlossberg's (1989) theory of college student's mattering relates to college student retention in the context of a Christian institution of higher education. In addition, the authors created and tested a "spiritual mattering" measure based on Schlossberg's theory. Mattering is a self-perception that refers to how important we believe we are to others. Schlossberg (1989) inserted this concept into the realm of higher education when she examined mattering and adult students returning to college. The purpose of the study was accomplished through the following three research objectives: a) Determining whether "institutional" mattering predicts fall-to-fall semester persistence of first-year students at a religiously-affiliated campus; b) Constructing a *spiritual mattering* measure and assessing its psychometric properties; and c) Determining whether spiritual mattering predicts fall-to-fall semester persistence of first-year students at a Christian institution of higher education. The results of the study supported the hypothesis that higher scores for both spiritual mattering and university mattering were significantly related to higher retention rates at an institution of higher education.

With college student retention an issue at many institutions of higher education around the United States, researchers have comprehensively examined numerous facets of why students leave higher education in order to provide solutions to the metaphorical “retention puzzle” (Bank, Slavings, & Biddle, 1990; Barefoot, 2004; Braxton, 2000; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Higher education institutions continue to implement research-informed strategies in order to improve retention on their campuses. However, many in the higher education community believe there is more to discover about this complex phenomenon (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 2006). In addition, little research on retention has been conducted that examines retention facets in a Christian higher education setting. Therefore, continued research is necessary.

“Mattering,” the concept to be examined in the current study, is a psychological concept that merits greater attention in relation to student retention. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) were some of the first researchers to define mattering. They suggested that “mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165). Schlossberg (1989) and other scholars (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Lynch, Schlossberg, & Chickering, 1989) closely linked mattering to greater student involvement and retention. These scholars argued that mattering facilitates persistence because it promotes a feeling of belonging and social integration into the campus environment, which is a key concept in Tinto’s model of student departure.

Several studies have looked broadly at mattering as it relates to the experience of college students; however, few studies have directly tested the relationship between institutional mattering and student retention. In addition, the author of the present study was unable to locate any studies examining the concept of mattering as it relates to student retention in a Christian higher education context.

Review of Related Literature

Schlossberg (1989) was one of the first researchers to examine mattering in a higher education context. In her seminal article, Schlossberg (1989) explored some of the key concepts of mattering and gave insight into the difference between marginality—when one feels pushed aside, unimportant, or non-central—and its polar opposite, mattering. She stated that the times people are most vulnerable to feeling marginalized are during transitions, when they are out of their comfort zones. The move to an institution of higher education is certainly a transition, and so it creates the threat of marginalization. Similarly, Cooper (1997) noted that non-traditional and African American students are susceptible to marginalization, most likely because they are usually in the minority. It is important to understand these risks and to help students avoid marginalization and increase their levels of mattering.

Although some interesting exploratory research has been conducted, much of the literature regarding mattering is primarily based in theory. In more recent years, researchers have been working to validate and standardize all the models and theories surrounding this construct, as well as to find better ways to measure it. France and Finney (2009) took the multiple dimensions defined by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) and attempted to clarify what model to use when measuring mattering. France and Finney, after testing one-, two-, three-, and four-factor models, landed on the four-factor model including attention, importance, ego-extension and dependence. In 2010, France and Finney furthered their work with mattering by adapting and validating the *University Mattering Scale* (UMS) to measure mattering specifically in university students. It is important to note that their study found evidence that the types of mattering are not interchangeable, so it is important to have a measure created specifically for mattering in universities if this topic is to be accurately explored.

Scholars interested in mattering as it pertains to universities continue to try to fill in other gaps in the research to understand better and measure this construct. Much of the preliminary data collected in this field has been limited by the populations which have been studied. Tovar, Simon, and Lee (2009), looking to expand the populations being examined, included a much more diverse college student population in their studies, surveying students attending a wide range of schools, from community college to master's level programs. Using this population, Tovar et al. (2009) created and validated a psychometrically sound instrument, the *College Mattering Inventory*. White and Nonnamaker (2008) had a similar idea: they examined mattering in doctoral students since most university mattering research is at the undergraduate level. During the study, they created the Communities of Influence model, focusing on belonging and mattering as they occur in various aspects of the student experience.

An obvious practical application of the many theories and findings regarding mattering is student retention in universities. The ability to measure mattering in students could assist higher education administrators in predicting, and possibly increasing, retention. Dixon and Robinson Kurpius (2008) studied students' success and graduation rates as related to the college stress, depression, self-esteem, and mattering levels of the students. Since college stress and depression are commonly connected to college dropout rates, it could be very helpful for retention efforts if there were a way to predict and even affect these variables. These researchers chose to examine mattering and self-esteem and found that the constructs were positively correlated and could predict effectively both depression and college stress, and thus, non-retention rates. Other studies pertaining to persistence and retention include Isaacson (2011) and Butcher (1997), both of whom tried different angles to get at the relationship between mattering

and persistence. While these studies were inconclusive, each study admitted to limitations and possible confounds that should be investigated. All in all, the many questions and uncertainties surrounding this topic highlight the need for further research.

One area that has hardly been researched in the study of mattering is how spirituality may influence this construct. The question is an important one, especially in a Christian higher education setting such as a Christian college or university where a student's faith may bring extra factors into the mattering construct. In a 2009 study, Seifert and Holman-Harmon discussed the importance of spirituality in the lives of college students, especially as it relates to their feelings of life-purpose and well-being. It is possible that mattering spiritually may also affect a student's likeliness to remain at a university. As "spiritual mattering" has not really been researched, a scale needs to be created and validated.

Research Objectives

The current study had three primary research objectives:

Objective 1: Determining whether "institutional" mattering predicts freshman to sophomore persistence of first-year students at a religiously-affiliated campus.

Objective 2: Constructing a *spiritual mattering* measure and assessing its psychometric properties.

Objective 3: Determining whether spiritual mattering predicts freshman to sophomore persistence of first-year students at a Christian institution of higher education.

Methods

Participants

The population selected for the study came from first-year students at Abilene Christian University, a selective, private, residential, master's-level university affiliated with the Churches of Christ located in Abilene, Texas. ACU is a member of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

The initial survey to validate the new spiritual mattering scale was administered to 101 undergraduate students. As the initial survey was not related to retention, these students were of all undergraduate classifications. Additionally, demographics were not collected during the initial deployment.

For the subsequent main retention survey, the sample size was 545. This survey measured university mattering and spiritual mattering, and only first-year students were included. After data collection, the data was reviewed to assure that

students were eligible for the study. The data of 42 students was removed due to ineligibility or incomplete surveys, leaving a sample size of 503 students eligible for the survey.

Of these 503 students, 38% were male and 62% were female. Regarding ethnicity, 75% of the students were White, 11% were Hispanic or Latino/a, 9% were Black or African American, 2% were Native American or American Indian, 3% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and less than 1% were of another ethnicity. Regarding church affiliation, 40% of the students identified as Church of Christ, 17% as Baptist, 3% as Catholic, 28% as non-denominational, 8% as other, and 3% as without church affiliation. The mean age of participants was 18.8, with a standard deviation of 1.4.

Procedure

Development of *Spiritual Mattering Scale*. An item pool was created to form the *Spiritual Mattering Scale* (SMS), using Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) three components of mattering—*attention*, *importance*, and *dependence*—as inspiration for the different items. An initial test deployment of the SMS item pool was conducted with a small sample of 101 undergraduate students in order to ascertain validity and reliability of the newly created instrument. The students were recruited by going to various undergraduate classes with the instructors' permission, at which point the survey and its purpose were thoroughly explained to all students. The students were made aware that participation in the study was completely optional, and they signed an informed consent before participating. The SMS item pool was analyzed with Cronbach's alpha and a factor analysis to remove poor items from the item pool. The final SMS items were then used in the main retention study.

University mattering and spiritual mattering in relation to retention. The main retention study survey included the *University Mattering Scale* (UMS), the *Spiritual Mattering Scale* (SMS), demographic questions, and a question asking for the students' ACU ID number for retention tracking purposes. It was administered to participants who were enrolled in a first-year level, required Bible course. The students were recruited by going to various first-year BIBL 102 classes with the instructors' permission, at which point the survey and its purpose were thoroughly explained to all students. The students were made aware that participation in the study was completely optional, and they signed an informed consent before participating.

After the final survey was administered, the university's Office of Institutional Research assisted in identifying those students who returned in the subsequent semester (persisters) and those who did not (non-persisters). This information was ascertained by tracking the students' ACU ID numbers to see which students remained at ACU. At that point, the students' data was coded into two groups—persisters and non-persisters—at which point all identifying information, namely the ACU ID numbers, was deleted to preserve student confidentiality. The new data from this deployment of the *Spiritual Mattering Scale* was analyzed with a follow-up factor analysis to further confirm the psychometrics of the scale. Then, the *University Mattering Scale* and the *Spiritual Mattering Scale* were correlated to discover if the two scales were similar yet not redundant. Finally, two independent samples t-tests were completed, one between student persistence/non-persistence and the UMS, and one between student persistence/non-persistence and the SMS.

Assessment of Institutional Mattering: The *University Mattering Scale*

The first instrument to be utilized was the *University Mattering Scale* (UMS). This scale is a version of Elliott, Kao, and Grant's (2004) general mattering index, adapted and validated by France and Finney (2010) for use with students in a university setting. It is a 24-item scale that represents three components of mattering (awareness, importance, and reliance) as defined by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981).

Assessment of Spiritual Mattering: The *Spiritual Mattering Scale*

To assess spiritual mattering, the *Spiritual Mattering Scale* (SMS) was constructed for the purposes of the current study. Items were drafted to sample the degree to which students felt that they mattered in the spiritual context of their faith-based educational experience. For each of the items of the SMS, students were asked to rate their perceived level of spiritual mattering. Although the initial scale contained nine items, listed in Table 1, the final scale was narrowed down to six, given in Table 2. Each item was rated on a 1 to 4 likert scale (*strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*) with items scored so that higher scores indicated greater level of perceived mattering. The psychometric properties of the SMS are discussed in the Results section. (Tables are on the following page.)

Tables

Table 1

Item Pool for the Creation of the SMS

Items

1. I feel like I make a spiritual difference on this campus.
2. Other students don't notice when I miss Chapel. (R)
3. Other students sometimes come to me with prayer requests.
4. My professors at ACU are not invested in my spiritual growth. (R)
5. Other students at ACU seek me out for discussions about faith issues.
6. I feel that, through campus opportunities and my local congregation, I am making a difference.
7. Spiritual leaders on campus and in the community know who I am.
8. I feel like God has been using me on this campus.
9. Much of the time, people of the ACU community are indifferent to my spiritual needs. (R)

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Note. (R) = reverse scored item

Table 2

Final SMS Items

Items

1. I feel like I make a spiritual difference on this campus.
2. Other students sometimes come to me with prayer requests.
3. Other students at ACU seek me out for discussions about faith issues.
4. I feel that, through campus opportunities and my local congregation, I am making a difference.
5. Spiritual leaders on campus and in the community know who I am.
6. I feel like God has been using me on this campus.

Results

The Creation and Psychometrics of the *Spiritual Mattering Scale*

Given that the *Spiritual Mattering Scale* (SMS) is a new measure and that others may wish to use it in future research, its psychometric properties were explored. First, to explore the dimensionality of the SMS items, an exploratory principal components analysis with Varimax rotation of the nine SMS items was conducted using the data from the initial test deployment. Based upon a scree test, a one-factor solution was determined to be the best fit for the items (eigenvalue = 3.12, % variance = 35%). Most of the SMS items displayed strong factor loadings. However, three items yielded weak or split factor loadings, so those items were eliminated and another analysis was performed with the remaining six items. Once again, a scree test revealed a one-factor solution to be the best fit (eigenvalue = 2.86, % variance = 48%). The final six-question scale was the SMS scale utilized in the large study.

When the final SMS was deployed within the context of the main retention study, a factor analysis was performed to confirm the scale's accuracy. The larger sample size produced even better results for the SMS, generating a one-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 3.68 and a percentage of variance of 62%. Moving from factor structure to reliability, the final SMS scale generated a Cronbach's alpha of .87. Finally, the mean of the SMS was 16.11, with a standard deviation of 3.38.

Spiritual Mattering Scale Relationship to University Mattering Scale

For the purposes of the present study, it was crucial to make sure that the SMS and the UMS were similar to the extent that they each measured an aspect of mattering, while different enough that they were not redundant. To ascertain that the SMS and the UMS were not redundant, a correlation was run between the two scales. The scales showed a significant correlation of .594, which suggests that the scales are similar, but not redundant.

Spiritual Mattering, University Mattering, and Persistence

Persistence. Abilene Christian University operates on a fall and spring semester academic calendar. To recap, participants were first-year students enrolled at ACU for the 2012-2013 academic year. Persistence was operationalized as returning to ACU for the subsequent fall 2013 term.

Of the 503 participants, 449 students were classified as “persisters.” Conversely, 54 “non-persisters” did not return to ACU after finishing a year at the school. Thus, in the language of retention, ACU retained 89.3% of the first-year participants from the spring 2013 to the fall 2013 semester.

Independent samples t-test analyses. Two independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare university and spiritual matting scores to persistence. As seen in Figure 1, there was a significant difference in means in university matting scores between persisters and non-persisters [$t(494) = 5.523, p < .001$]. In addition, as seen in Figure 2, there was a significant difference in means in spiritual matting scores between persisters and non-persisters [$t(491) = 4.077, p < .01$]. In other words, participants scoring higher on spiritual matting or university matting were more likely to persist at the university than students with lower scores.

Figures

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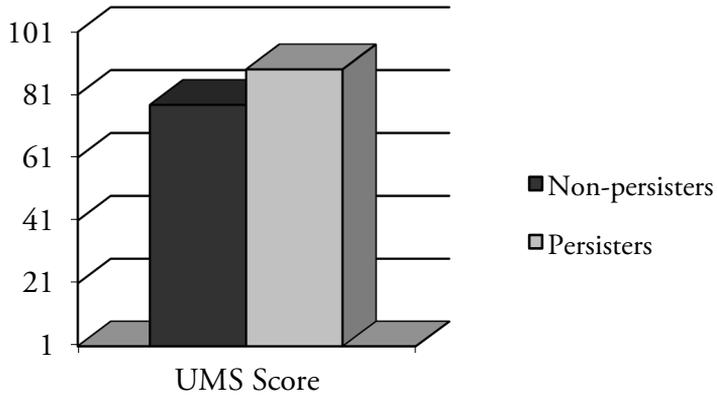


Figure 1. Spiritual matting scores in persisters and non-persisters.

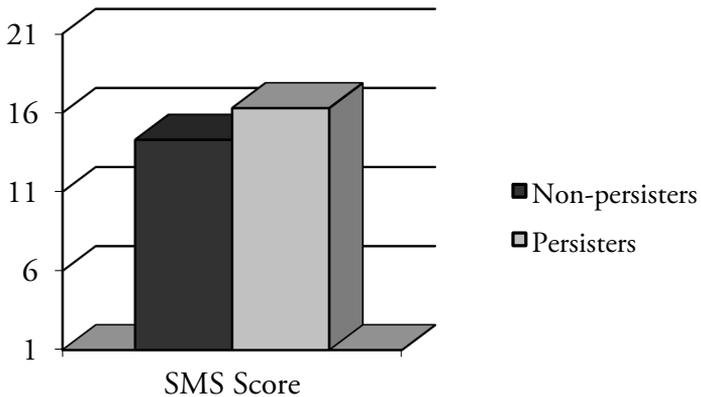


Figure 2. University matting scores in persisters and non-persisters.

Discussion

Summary of Results

As discussed previously, retention and drop-out rates are very important to higher education today. For many years, experts have attempted to figure out the many pieces of what has come to be known as the complicated “retention puzzle.” Although there is no one factor that explains everything, it is possible to find pieces to influence that will hopefully improve retention rates. One such piece might be the psychological construct of mattering, or “the feeling that one commands the interest or notice of another person” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164). The current study identified university mattering as a possible influence and proposed a new type of mattering called spiritual mattering as another factor that merits exploration.

The present study had three primary objectives. The first objective was to determine whether institutional mattering predicted freshman to sophomore persistence of first-year students at a religiously-affiliated campus. Based on the results of the study, there seemed to be a link between institutional mattering and freshman to sophomore persistence on this particular campus. The second objective of the study was to construct a *spiritual mattering* measure and assess its psychometric properties. This objective was also accomplished, and a factor analysis confirmed the scale’s accuracy. The third objective of the study was to determine whether spiritual mattering predicted freshman to sophomore persistence of first-year students at a Christian institution of higher education. Based on the analysis of the data collected for the study, there seemed to be a link between spiritual mattering and freshman to sophomore persistence on this particular campus.

Implications for Practice

Institutions of higher education are continually looking for sound research on college student retention. The current study not only moved the research forward on the concept of mattering as it relates to retention, but it also highlighted spiritual mattering as a concept that may be useful at faith-based institutions of higher education. For those who work in the field of higher education, including administration, faculty, and staff, the research presented here confirms the importance of relationship building, hospitality, and community. Administrators who seek to improve retention rates at their institutions, faith-based or not, may find this information helpful.

First-year and orientation programs may be interested in the relationship between mattering and retention and could try to integrate activities that increase university and spiritual mattering into orientation and first-year programming,

both in and out of the classroom. Student Life offices may also be affected. Administrators in this area should make sure that students integrate and feel like they matter to the university. Residence Life and other extra-curricular programming should reflect this philosophy. Not only should administrators focus on and support general mattering, but also spirituality and spiritual mattering. The findings of the present study could also be helpful to retention offices. As such offices study and work to manage and improve retention and dropout rates in the short and long term, a simple measure such as this may be very helpful.

Limitations

The current study was limited in several ways. The primary limitation was that it was performed on a very specific and limited group of people. For example, it included students from one university, with a very specific Christian affiliation—Church of Christ. The study’s sample was also heavily female and White, and although the gender and race breakdown in the study was an accurate representative of the gender and race breakdown at ACU, the full picture was limited.

Another possible limitation was that the selection process was imperfect and could have been more randomized. Perhaps there might be another way to improve selection; maybe the Office of Institutional Research could have sent out an email to all freshman students, although electronic deployment can cause a unique set of problems.

Directions for Future Research

While being able to see the relationship between university mattering or spiritual mattering and retention is useful, the current study only assessed the relationship after the university had lost students. A future study that could yield more insight would be to take the relationship and try to make it into a cleaner predictive model. This would be the next step in aiding higher education institutions in finding helpful ways to use these ideas. Hopefully, such a study could allow practitioners to make interventions before students leave.

It would also be fascinating to see how mattering, and especially spiritual mattering, affects retention at a secular institution. A study exploring whether spiritual mattering is relevant in secular institutions could yield some interesting results. Perhaps the effect is as strong at secular colleges and universities; conversely, perhaps spiritual mattering is still important to retention, but not to the same degree as at private, faith-based schools.

One final question that seems crucial to ask is: “What exactly promotes mattering and spiritual mattering?” It is clear that it is positive and helps retention, but what specific factors or interventions promote it? A study delving in to several different

possible interventions and factors with a pre- and post-tests would be very helpful for getting new ideas as to how to augment mattering levels.

Conclusion

Years of retention research have aimed to solve the retention puzzle, and although the research has yielded some interesting findings and interventions, drop-out rates remain fairly static. With the rising cost of education and the competition for students, it is crucial to make sure universities are satisfying students' needs. The face of higher education might be changing, and it is important for institutions to stay relevant and continue to offer the best products that keep students engaged and enrolled. Retention is vital to universities in order to maintain solid finances and a good reputation, and it is important to the financial well-being and future success of students.

One way to increase retention and to improve the experiences of students could be to try to increase students' levels of mattering, particularly university mattering and spiritual mattering. Ever since Schlossberg (1989) discussed the importance of mattering in relation to the college student experience, researchers have looked into and upheld the idea that mattering can improve higher education. However, the current research put quantitative, evidential support behind the idea and linked these two types of mattering directly to student retention. This might be a step in the right direction for higher education and is certainly an idea worth pursuing in future research and practice. 

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