BACCALAUREATE DEGREE COMPLETION TIME OF STUDENTS AT THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

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**RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Students choosing the two-year college system as an entry point for completing the baccalaureate degree may experience additional time for degree completion. The problem with this delay is the financial burden placed on students by incurring additional expenses and prolonging the time required to enter careers in their chosen discipline.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

This non-experimental quantitative study seeks to answer the primary research question: Is there a difference in baccalaureate degree completion time for students using the embedded two-year college at The University of Montana, Missoula?

**LEADERSHIP QUESTION**

Have policy and initiatives (interventions) improved baccalaureate degree completion time for students?

**MUS Transfer Policy (State)**

- **Common Course Numbering:** statewide catalog of courses
- **MUS General Education Core:** single set of general education requirements for all students
- **College Now:** improve perception and offerings at 2-year colleges
- **High School Dual-Credit:** early college for HS students

**Administration/Faculty (UM)**

- **Advising Plans & Advising Center:** provide a clearly defined path for students (Tinto, 2005)

**METHOD**

**Data Collection:** Public Data Method

The study was purposefully designed to rely solely on publicly available data. The public data method uses those elements of the student record considered “Directory Information” by FERPA and the Office of the Registrar at the University of Montana.

UM has designated the following information about students as public (directory) information, which may be released to the public: Dates of attendance, School or College, Date of graduation and degree(s) received. IRB approval was obtained prior to initiating the research study.

**Coding and Measurement:** Months to Completion

Four year completion = ~45 to ~47 months (yellow).
Four year plus an additional semester = ~48 to ~52 months (green)

Caution: “Rounding Errors!”

**a priori Assumptions:**

- **Alpha Level**
  - \( \alpha = 0.05 \)
- Nominal level data measurement (rather than ratio)
- Nominal data categories are more relevant in comparisons involving completion of academic semesters.
- Eliminate transfer students
  - Students completion in less than 4 years is likely due to additional semesters completed at another institution.
- Measure all two-year college students, not just AA degree completers
  - Some students choose not to complete the degree.

**Sample Selection:** Data Reduction Algorithm

The study examined eight years of attendance records at The University of Montana. An algorithm consisting of a series of SQL queries reduced the initial collection of attendance records from 215,386 elements to the 172 two-year college students graduating during AY2014. A sample size of 141 participants (following elimination of potential transfer students) were identified for this study.

**FINDINGS**

Of the 1886 baccalaureate degree student graduating during 2014, 172 (9%) used the two-year college in completing the degree at UM. Of these 172 Baccalaureate Degree completers, only 30 finished the AA degree while 8 finished the AAS degree.

**Descriptive Statistics:** Frequency Distribution

**ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Using the Chi-Square as a goodness-of-fit test, it was determined there is a statistically significant difference in degree completion time between students using the two-year college and the overall UM population, \( \chi^2(6, n = 141) = 27.64, p = 0.0001 \), therefore the null hypothesis is rejected, the effect size was found to be small, \( r = 0.198 \) (\( r < 0.30; Cohen 1988 \)). The size of the sample is a shortcoming of the study, potentially influencing inferential statistical analysis. The recommended sample size for the population (\( N = 1508; Raosoft \)) is \( n = 307 \) (n)

Although only 16% of two-year college students complete the baccalaureate degree in four years (as compared to 32% of UM students), while 69% finish within 6 years as compared with 73% of all UM graduates.

The study fails to account for the unique characteristics, such as part-time student, of the non-traditional student population prevalent in two-year colleges. A study comparing differences in degree completion time using total credits completed could yield new information.

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