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PERSISTERS AND NONPERSISTERS IN A GRADUATE LEVEL, NONTRADITIONAL, LIBERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study focused upon persisters and nonpersisters in a graduate level, nontraditional, liberal education program. Five demographic factors proved to be significant: age, type of Bachelor's degree held, years between completion of the Bachelor's Degree and enrollment in the Master's degree program, distance from Masters degree program site, and the social science score on the Undergraduate Assessment Program Test. Three areas of personal variables also were examined: purposes, personality traits and abilities, and instructional preferences. Significantly different responses were obtained from the two groups on one purpose statement, but none from the personality traits and abilities or instructional preference. Significant findings and trends are discussed. Canonical discriminant analysis is used to determine the most parsimonious combination of variables in explaining the variance between persisters and nonpersisters.

Persisters and nonpersisters in adult education programs represent two groups that have received increased attention over the last two decades. Elegant program designs notwithstanding, the success of a program is ultimately measured by the individual successes of its participants. Persisters (i.e., those who successfully complete a program) and nonpersisters, who for a variety of reasons fail to complete a program, constitute two distinct groups. Discovering differences between the groups is what studies of persistence try to do.

BACKGROUND

Long (1983), after reviewing several major attrition studies from 1963 to 1980, tentatively concluded that persisters and nonpersisters are different, at least with regard to certain demographic variables. He reported, "there is rather firm evidence that generally those who continue (persist) are older, are married, have a different delayed gratification pattern, and different affiliation and achievement needs" (p. 148). Those who did not persist, "appear to have usually been less successful in previous schooling activities, may have academic weaknesses such as reading problems, and may be less successful occupationally" (Long, 1983, p. 148).

Long (1983) believed the research he reviewed revealed remarkable similarities between nonpersisters and nonparticipants as well as similarities between persisters and participants.

> The elements common to both participation and persistence and nonparticipation and dropout suggest that these phenomena may emerge from the same

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> psychological syndrome. If so, the more we learn about dropouts, the better we may understand nonparticipants and vice versa (Long, 1983, p. 140).

Commonalities among persisters and participants, however, may well be subject to the original motive(s) that account for self-selecting into an activity. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) warned, "the motivational orientations of distinctive subpopulations of adults, such as the disadvantaged or health professionals, might well differ from those of the general public" (p. 135). And, one might add, the motivations could differ among the subpopulations. It seems logical that reasons for persisting or not persisting could be unique to certain subpopulations.

The degree to which a participation model helps explain persistence cannot be tested without active intervention before, during, and after the educational experience. Even if such interventions were practical, the likelihood of getting simple answers to the complex question of who persists and why is still remote. The complexity of the question is addressed by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) as they speculated about a hypothetical female participant.

> She might not be aware of, or be able to articulate, all the underlying motivations for her action. Nonetheless, like those of most adult learners, her reasons for continuing her education are multiple, interrelated, closely connected to life roles, and highly personal (p. 136).

Long (1983) suggested that advancement of research concerning persistence and nonpersistence could be encouraged by two developments: "1) improved explanatory research designs using multivariate analysis techniques and 2) new and strengthened instrumentation or use of projective techniques and procedures currently available" (p. 152). Long's suggestions are laudable, though not always possible, especially regarding nonformal programs where institutions frequently maintain few, if any, records of students—demographic or otherwise. Sosdian (1978), for example, in her survey of external degree programs, had to rely on administrators' estimates as her primary data source for students' demographic data.

The use of intact groups and reliance on institutional data have plagued educational researchers for decades. Inferences of causality are precluded, of course, but descriptions of apparent relationships can be made, and accumulated evidence can suggest associations that permit possible explanations of phenomena.

It may be that some reseachers have sufficient control over adult education participants, or that some program administrators are sufficiently interested in research to arrange for the systematic collection of pre-and post-demographic and psychological data for analysis. Should either of these conditions occur, the field of adult education will have grown measurably. Until then, we must make do with what we have and hope we provide a greater contribution than is made by wringing our hands.

Focusing on the participant or the persister is a challenge in itself. If we do not attend to the type of educational experience in which adults are participating and persisting, the exclusive focus on the persister is unwise.

In most studies of attrition to date, the adults were participating in either a

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noncredit, recreational course or a high school completion remedial program. None of the studies examined persisters and nonpersisters in a graduate level, nontraditional, liberal education program. Generalizing from one or two populations to a third is tenuous, at best. It may be that generalizations about persisters and nonpersisters are situation-specific. Until more studies are conducted in different adult education settings, we can only be tentative with generalizations about who finishes a program and who does not. The present study is an exploratory attempt to find differences between persisters and nonpersisters in a graduate level, nontraditional, liberal education program.

SETTING

The Master of Liberal Studies (MLS) program at the University of Oklahoma is a nontraditional, institution-affiliated degree program especially designed for adults who want a graduate degree but are unable to attend classes in the traditional format. The program was begun in 1970. The MLS permits "majoring" in one of three areas: the social sciences, humanities, or natural sciences. Students choose a major, attend a two-or three-week team-directed seminar annually, read and report on books between seminars, and carry out a thesis project under the direction of a three-member faculty committee. Faculty members are selected from the University and compensated on an overload basis. The MLS degree is designed to be a two-year program.

Unlike many continuing professional training settings, the MLS is not mandatory for any group. Participants ostensibly are attracted because of the liberal (read nonvocational and nonremedial) purpose and convenient arrangement of scheduling.

Admission requirements for the MLS are the same as for any Master's program on the main campus. The Graduate College requires a minimum 3.0 GPA (A = 4.0) over the last sixty credit hours of undergraduate enrollment. In addition, the MLS requires scores at or above the 50th percentile on three subtests of the Undergraduate Assessment Program (from ETS). Probationary admission is possible with deficiency assignments added to the regular reading requirements.

PROCEDURE

Applicants to the MLS program complete a questionnaire that asks for demographic information. With few exceptions, records have been maintained efficiently to compare persisters (i.e., those successfully completing the program) with nonpersisters, the latter being considered withdrawn by their own initiation or through prolonged inattention to their studies, usually a year or more.

The design is ex post facto, relying on information collected at the time of application to the program. *T*-values are reported in the tables. Chi-square values for discrete categories are reported in the text. A follow-up study, especially of nonpersisters, would be helpful to gain insight into reasons for dropping out, as well as checking on whether or not nonpersisters in the MLS continued and successfully completed some other kind of educational program. Given the above limitations, useful information can be examined to compare demographic and personal variables of two well-defined groups: persisters and nonpersisters in a graduate level, nontraditional, liberal education program.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Significant Demographic Variables

Age

The difference between the average age of persisters (42.4) and that of nonpersisters (38.0) was significant. Table 1 contains a summary of those data, but an analysis of the distribution of age groups better reveals where the significance lies. Figure 1 shows the distribution of persisters and nonpersisters by age groups. Although the largest number of participants are in the age brackets of 26 to 49, the notable differences ($\chi^2 = 24.55$; $p < .001$) exist within the youngest bracket and the two oldest (50–55 and 55+). Younger participants are not likely to persist, while older participants are.

The liberal education emphasis of this program might well be related to the difference in age of persisters and nonpersisters. The nonvocational nature of the curriculum should have a greater appeal to those well established in their careers and lives. The lack of persistence of younger adults, when compared with older, suggests younger students may be seeking vocation-related education.

Bachelor Degree Program Type

A comparison was made of persisters and nonpersisters regarding the type of Bachelor's degree program in which they were enrolled. The types of Bachelor degree programs included social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and nontraditional. The nontraditional programs included Bachelor of Liberal Studies (BLS) from Oklahoma University, the Bachelor of Independent Studies from Brigham Young University and the University of South Florida, and the External Degree Program of State University of New York. When all nontraditional program degree recipients are compared against degree recipients in social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, persisters are significantly over-represented in the nontraditional category ($\chi^2 = 47.2$; $p < .001$). When BLS degree recipients are compared with both of the other nontraditional degree programs and traditional degree programs, both the BLS degree recipient and nontraditional degree recipients are significantly over-represented in the persisters category ($\chi^2 = 28.049$; $p < .001$).

Participants with nontraditional degrees are much more likely to persist in the

Table 1
Age at Enrollment of Persisters and Nonpersisters

Group	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-Value
Persisters	192	42.4	10.5	4.47*
Nonpersisters	260	38.0	9.7	

* $p < .001$

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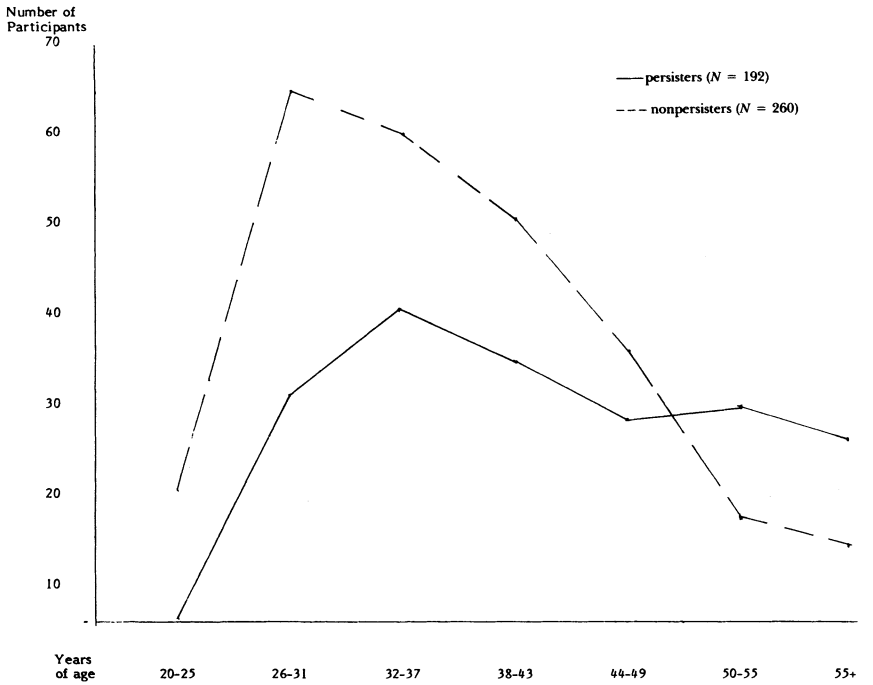

Figure 1. Persisters and Nonpersisters by Age Group.

MLS. Experience with nontraditional modes of instruction appears to be an advantage to students entering this nontraditional graduate degree program. Nontraditional degree programs probably reward behaviors that are more individual in nature and self-driven in terms of initiative and completion.

Years Between Completion of Bachelors Degree and Enrollment in MLS

The number of years between graduating with a bachelor's degree and application to the MLS was different for persisters and nonpersisters. The longer the period from graduation to enrollment, the less likely the students are to persist. As Table 2 indicates, the mean number of years for persisters was 6.6 and for nonpersisters was 8.6.

Table 2
Years Between Completion of Bachelor's Degree and Enrollment in MLS

Group	N^a	*M*	*SD*	*t*-Value
Persisters	185	6.6	8.1	2.40**
Nonpersisters	228	8.6	8.1	

[a] Lower *N* due to missing data from early program participants
** $p < .02$

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The difference in time since completion of a Bachelor's degree and the age difference reveal an interesting phenomenon. Apparently, older recipients of Bachelor's degrees who enroll in a nontraditional graduate program closer in time to their first degree are more likely to persist. With the current trend of longer periods from initial enrollment in college programs to graduation and older students returning to school, these data are encouraging.

Distance from MLS Program Site

The distribution of persisters and nonpersisters within three distance categories of less than 50, 50 to 500, and more than 500 miles revealed significant differences ($\chi^2 = 10.88$; $p < .004$). Persisters were over-represented in the category of more than 500 miles. It may be that students coming from over 500 miles away are more committed because of the investment of time and expense in traveling. It could also be that students coming from greater distances spend more time learning about the program before investing the time in travel.

UAP Scores

The Undergraduate Assessment Program (UAP) test was given at the time of admission to the program. Three separate subscores are included in this instrument: social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. Of these three indicators, only the score on the social science component was different for persisters and non-persisters.

The analysis of subscores by the MLS major indicated that the social science score difference was significant only for social science majors. The overall significance of the social science subtest may be explained by the disproportionate number of social science majors within the MLS program.

Other Demographic Variables

Several other demographic variables were examined when persisters and nonpersisters were compared: gender, marital status, the kind of occupation held by the participants, the type of undergraduate school attended, undergraduate grade point average, admission status (regular or probationary), and type of MLS major. None of these variables was significantly different for persisters and nonpersisters.

The overall distribution of males and females was approximately 60/40, respectively, and remained that within persisters and nonpersisters. Marital status was about 80% married overall, and the percentage was consistent within the persisters and nonpersisters groups.

Occupations were grouped as professional, technical, homemaker, retired and other. Over 80% of all participants were considered professional, and that percentage remained among both persisters and nonpersisters.

The type of undergraduate school (public or private) was split overall about 70/30, respectively, and these proportions were maintained in persisters and nonpersisters.

The undergraduate grade point average of persisters and nonpersisters was not different. Nor was admission status a significant factor. Students scoring

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beneath the 50th percentile on any of the UAP subtests were given an additional reading and writing assignment to compensate for the low score. About 30% of all applicants were admitted on probation, and the same percentage of probationary students was found among persisters and nonpersisters. Finally, the type of MLS major (i.e., social science, humanities and natural sciences) was not disproportionately distributed between persisters and nonpersisters.

Personal Variables

The MLS program instituted more extensive data collection procedures beginning in 1980. Applicants were asked to complete an eight-page questionnaire that included surveys regarding their purposes for applying, self-perceived personality traits and abilities, and instructional preferences.

The number of applicants (persisters and nonpersisters) from 1980 to the spring of 1986 totaled 108—53 persisters and 55 nonpersisters. Compared with the pre-1980 statistics of 40% persistence rate, the success rate since 1980 approaches 50%. The results of the three major surveys—purpose, personality traits and abilities, and instructional preferences, are discussed below.

Purpose for Participating

Table 3 contains the 15 purpose statements to which students responded when applying for admission. The response categories ranged from 1 = "Not important" to 5 = "Extremely important." As the probability levels for the *t*-statistic indicate, only one purpose statement was responded to significantly differently by persisters and nonpersisters ($p < .05$).

The persisters indicated a stronger interest in "Increasing my appreciation of art, music, literature and other cultural expressions," which suggests congruence between the persisters' intentions and the MLS program's primary liberal education purpose. It seems reasonable to expect persisters to rate this higher than nonpersisters as a goal, because it represents a nonutilitarian, liberal education purpose.

It is noteworthy, also, that of the 15 statements, 12 received more important ratings from nonpersisters than persisters. Although only one was statistically different, the unmistakable pattern of nonpersisters was to rate the majority of purpose statements higher than persisters. What the pattern might suggest is speculative, but the same pattern is repeated in the next category.

Personality Traits and Abilities

Table 4 contains values for 21 personality traits and abilities. The probability values for the obtained *t*-statistic also are reported. Applicants were asked to rate themselves on each trait or ability according to the following scale: 1 = Lowest 10%; 2 = Below average; 3 = Average; 4 = Above average; and 5 = Highest 10%.

None of the traits was rated significantly differently by the two groups. However, the overall directional pattern of responses found in the survey of purposes was repeated here as well. Of the 21 chances for different direction of ratings, if chance alone were operative, we would expect a distribution of 10 or

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Table 3
Purposes for Pursuing a Graduate Level, Non-Traditional, Liberal Education Program

Purpose	Persister M (N = 53)	Nonpersister M (N = 55)	p
a. To renew and develop intellectual skills.	4.26	4.42	.35
b. To gain knowledge that will help me interact with others.	3.33	3.50	.42
c. To increase my appreciation of art, music, literature and cultural expressions.	3.66	3.19	.05
d. To learn more about a subject area simply because I am interested in it.	3.92	4.25	.06
e. To improve my job skills and my ability to perform my work.	3.47	3.86	.11
f. To learn about national and world affairs.	2.98	3.15	.41
g. To learn how to participate more effectively as a citizen.	2.75	3.01	.17
h. To feel the enjoyment and have the experience of learning on my own.	3.86	3.94	.70
i. To obtain the credential which would make me eligible to receive the right pay for the work I am already doing.	2.69	2.86	.50
j. To improve my chances of good pay or promotion in my career.	3.09	3.28	.45
k. To obtain prerequisites for entry into a higher degree program, graduate or professional study.	2.72	2.96	.42
l. To develop a new career.	2.94	2.86	.83
m. To learn more about myself.	3.05	3.20	.54
n. To obtain the credential which would qualify me for the kind of jobs I really want.	3.35	3.48	.66
o. To have the satisfaction of having the degree.	3.79	3.50	.24

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Table 4
Personality Traits and Abilities at the Time of Application

Trait or Ability	Persister M (N = 53)	Nonpersister M (N = 55)	p
a. Intellectual curiosity	4.15	4.36	.11
b. Academic ability	3.94	4.09	.25
c. Motivation for achievement	4.16	4.38	.09
d. Physical vigor	3.52	3.70	.31
e. Reading ability	4.07	4.16	.58
f. Speaking ability	3.81	4.07	.11
g. Persistence	4.01	4.29	.06
h. Leadership	3.75	3.90	.32
i. Ability to handle stress	3.71	3.90	.21
j. Self-confidence	3.88	3.83	.73
k. Writing ability	4.01	3.96	.70
l. Ability to do independent work	4.37	4.27	.43
m. Optimism	4.00	3.92	.62
n. Tolerance	3.83	3.81	.94
o. Self-discipline	4.07	4.03	.77
p. Originality	3.83	4.05	.13
q. Personal organization	3.84	3.85	.96
r. Mathematical ability	3.00	3.03	.84
s. Assertiveness	3.54	3.70	.34
t. Mental health and emotional stability	3.84	4.05	.18
u. Ability to deal with uncertainty	3.62	3.80	.28

11 for each direction between persisters and nonpersisters. Instead, the distribution is six for persisters and 15 for nonpersisters.

The disproportionate distribution of higher ratings nonpersisters give for purposes, traits, and abilities suggests a propensity to inflate or overrate their perceptions. There seems to be a kind of bluster syndrome among nonpersisters, but the lack of significant differences between means mitigates against forming such a conclusion. The pattern is unmistakable, but the meaning is elusive.

Instructional Preferences

Applicants were asked to rate 23 ways of learning that reflect instructional preferences. They responded according to the following scale: 1 = Of little help; 2 = Helpful; and 3 = Very helpful. Table 5 contains the methods, the means for persisters and nonpersisters, and the respective probability values for the t-statistic.

None of the 23 methods were rated significantly differently by the two

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Table 5
Instructional Preferences at the Time of Application

	Method	Persisters M (N = 53)	Nonpersisters M (N = 55)	p
a.	Studying maps, charts, and graphs	2.09	2.25	.24
b.	Workbooks or programmed instruction	2.09	2.03	.60
c.	Memorizing facts	1.71	1.78	.46
d.	Developing own project or writing comprehensive paper	2.73	2.60	.21
e.	Listing your own personal experiences to measure the value of a new theory or principle	2.31	2.30	.96
f.	Informal "bullsessions"	2.24	2.33	.49
g.	Audio presentations	2.18	2.12	.61
h.	Reading texts and resource materials	2.71	2.76	.60
i.	Critiquing books or writings	2.41	2.32	.47
j.	Audio-visual presentations	2.39	2.41	.84
k.	Attending concerts, exhibits, or dramatic productions	2.41	2.32	.48
l.	Field trips	2.52	2.56	.73
m.	Television instruction programs	2.15	2.05	.43
n.	Observing someone demonstrate a skill	2.49	2.54	.63
o.	Using library sources to complete an assignment	2.61	2.60	.97
p.	Participating in panel discussions, debates, role plays, or drama	2.30	2.32	.90
q.	Drill or practice on a skill	2.20	2.40	.09
r.	Receiving feedback from professors for papers, oral reports, etc.	2.60	2.67	.47
s.	A classroom instruction situation	2.26	2.27	.93
t.	Individualized student-tutor situation	2.42	2.50	.51
u.	Telephone conversations	2.00	1.92	.53
v.	Small group discussions	2.54	2.55	.93
w.	Lectures and speeches	2.32	2.30	.86

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groups. Furthermore, there was no apparent pattern of one group exceeding the other. Of the total of 23, persisters ranked 10 higher and nonpersisters 13.

Canonical Discriminant Analyses

It is useful to look for significantly different frequency distributions between the two groups when a variety of comparisons are made. In order to test the relative power or strength of the variables or combinations of variables that serve to separate persisters from nonpersisters, however, a multivariate statistic must be used. The canonical discriminant analysis procedure was used to find the most parsimonious model of variables to account for the variance between persisters and nonpersisters.

The first canonical discriminant anlysis was performed over the demographic variables alone in order to take advantage of the larger number of subjects. The three variables which, in combination, account for the most variance between persisters and nonpersisters are: age, social science subtest score of the UAP, and number of years from Bachelor's degree. Table 6 contains a summary of the values associated with each of these variables. In total, they account for 9.3% of the variance between the two groups.

Table 7 is a summary of the second canonical discriminant analysis that included personal variables, combining to account for 24.7% of the variance between persisters and nonpersisters. One caution with interpretation, however, is the relatively small number of cases for which complete data were available. As indicated earlier, information on the personal variables had been collected only since 1980.

Table 7 contains the time from Bachelor's degree to enrollment in the MLS despite its R-square value that was rounded to zero. Without it, the total canonical correlation was .224, but by adding it to the model, the total was increased to .247.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

An examination of records maintained over a sixteen year period permitted an exploratory study comparing persisters and nonpersisters in a graduate level,

Table 6
Summary of Demographic Variable Values Making Up the Most Parsimonious Model to Account for Differences Between Persisters and Nonpersisters

Variable	Mean		R-squared
	Persisters (N = 179)	Nonpersisters (N = 221)	
Age	42.2	38.0	.041
Social Science UAP Score	539.7	508.2	.023
Years from Bachelors Degree	6.7	8.7	.013

Total Squared Canonical Correlation = .093

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Table 7
Summary of All Variable Values Making Up the Most Parsimonious Model to Account for Differences Between Persisters and Nonpersisters

Variable	Mean		*R*-squared
	Persisters (N = 45)	Nonpersisters (N = 46)	
Age	41.7	37.4	.045
Social Science UAP Score	521.7	482.8	.043
Years from Bachelors Degree	7.0	6.9	.000
Increase in Appreciation of art	3.6	3.0	.056
Learn more simply because I'm interested	3.9	4.2	.019
Motivation	4.2	4.4	.020
Speaking ability	3.7	4.1	.036

Total Squared Canonical Correlation = .247

nontraditional, liberal education program. Unlike previous studies of persisters which were set in remedial or vocational environments, this comparison of persisters and nonpersisters was conducted within a program that promoted liberal education as its primary purpose. It was assumed that generalizations about persisters and nonpersisters from adult education programs with different purposes would not apply. A "bottom line" estimate of the difference between persisters and nonpersisters could be made with a knowledge of certain demographic and personal variables and multivariate statistical techniques.

The findings are mixed with regard to other studies. Whereas Long (1983) found persistence associated with older, married, and more academically successful adults, the present study found age to be associated with persistence, but not marital status or grade point average. The age finding, combined with years since Bachelor's degree, suggests older adults who more recently received their last degree are more likely to persist. The type of undergraduate program also seemed to account for success. Adults who completed a nontraditional undergraduate degree were more likely to persist in this nontraditional graduate level program.

Pretest scores from the Undergraduate Assessment Program were of limited use. Only one subscore, that from the social sciences, helped to separate persisters from nonpersisters and then only significantly within the social science major option of the MLS. Because social sciences represented about 70% of all MLS participants, the subscore was significant overall.

Findings of differences on the three surveys of personal variables suggested a trend or pattern more than a solid, statistical consistency. Nonpersisters tended to rate themselves more highly on traits and abilities. Whether or not this over-

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rating is symptomatic of a trait in itself is speculative. It is tempting, however, to infer a kind of bluster syndrome associated with nonpersisters.

Finally, Long's (1983) suggestion to use multivariate techniques was followed and yielded an overall estimate of the value of certain variables, which when taken in combination, accounted for differences between persisters and nonpersisters. The most parsimonious combination of variables (age, social science score, years from Bachelor's degree, and the four self-reports on appreciating art, learning more simply out of interest, motivation, and speaking ability) accounted for 24.7% of the variance between persisters and nonpersisters. Ironically, self reports on the last three personal variables were inversely related to persistence!

We are less than sanguine in not uncovering more of the mystery surrounding persistence, but are encouraged by finding some differences that support previous findings. It may be that further testing of the significant variables and trends discovered here will result in more refined generalizations about persisters and nonpersisters. It may be, too, that Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) were more correct than they realized when suggesting the multiple, complex, and highly personal reasons most adults have for participation and persistence.

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