

1. Proposal Cover Page

2004 AIR DISSERTATION FELLOWSHIP PROPOSAL

“Institutional Characteristics and Student Success in Sub-Baccalaureate Education”

Data sets of interest: BPS and IPEDS

Grant Amount Requested: \$15,000

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2. Project Summary

The majority of research on persistence in postsecondary education has focused on students at four-year colleges. Nearly half of all college students are enrolled in two-year schools, however, and low-income, ethnic minority, and first-generation college students are over-represented at such institutions. Not only are community colleges rarely studied, but private two-year colleges are virtually ignored. Furthermore, while research has shown that persistence and attainment are influenced by individual characteristics, the research on institutional characteristics and student success has been less abundant and findings less clear. This is unfortunate, given that policy reforms almost certainly have greater potential to affect institutional structures than individual behaviors.

This study seeks to make three distinctive contributions: (1) to enhance understanding of different types of two-year colleges; (2) to examine the direct and indirect influence of institutional characteristics on student outcomes; and (3) to apply insights from prior qualitative and quantitative research on a local college sample to a national longitudinal sample.

Using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS: 1996/2001) and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the study proposes a two-stage model, wherein characteristics of the college are hypothesized to influence student integration, which in turn impacts college persistence and eventual degree completion. Methods will include multivariate weighted least squares and binary logistic regression.

By identifying those institutional structures that promote persistence at two-year colleges, this study seeks to provide education policy makers—including the administrators who run such schools, academics who study them, and public officials who determine their funding—with additional tools to understand and improve students' success in postsecondary education.

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4. Project Description

“Institutional Characteristics and Student Success in Sub-Baccalaureate Education”

(a) Statement of problem and variables:

Nearly half of all post-secondary enrollments are in two-year colleges (Bailey, 2003), and the skill demands of the contemporary economy suggest that enrollments in both transfer and occupational programs should increase. Among sub-baccalaureate institutions, community colleges were founded, at least in part, with the intent to make a college degree more accessible for students who had been historically excluded from higher education (Dougherty, 1994). Yet a low proportion of students at community colleges ever complete a degree. Furthermore, minority students—who, along with low-income and first-generation college students, are over-represented at such institutions—continue to have the lowest college completion rates (NCES, 2003). If two-year colleges are to serve their purposes of preparing students for both the university and the labor market, administrators and policy makers need to know which institutional structures support student success and under what conditions.

While the vast majority of students enrolled in sub-baccalaureate programs attend public community colleges, some 4% are enrolled in private, career-oriented schools, which have been studied less often and less systematically (Apling, 1993; Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). The institutional characteristics of these schools often differ markedly from community colleges, especially with respect to their mission and goals, academic culture, curricular development and instruction, and student services (Bailey et al., 2001; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). At the same time, minority students are even more over-represented in private occupational colleges than in community colleges (Apling, 1993). Perhaps

most importantly, among similar students, completion rates are higher at these private occupational colleges than at public community colleges (Bailey et al., 2001).

Why are students at occupational colleges more likely to complete the degree than similar students at community colleges? Is this merely a matter of selection, where perhaps more motivated students enroll in private colleges? Or might the structural differences described by Bailey and his colleagues (2001) play a role in student persistence?

The two models for college persistence that have received the most attention in recent decades are Tinto's (1987; 1993) model of student integration and Bean's (1980; 1982) model of student departure. While the models differ in conceptualization and emphasis, they overlap in that both see student persistence as "the result of a complex set of interactions over time," which is affected by the degree to which the student and institution are well matched (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; p. 145). Tinto hypothesizes that this match promotes social and academic integration, which he sees as necessary ingredients in student persistence. Similarly, Bean sees attitudes about the institution as influencing the student's intent to stay in school. Despite strong emphasis in both models on institutional factors, however, researchers have often relied on student reports of participation in and satisfaction with certain aspects of their college experience, rather than measuring institutional characteristics directly (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1993; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986). While such indicators provide useful information, they may not always reflect key aspects of the institutional structure itself.

Extending from the work of Tinto and Bean, Pascarella (1985) has developed a model of student persistence that focuses on directly measured institutional characteristics; but, the subsequent literature on this model has usually relied on samples from four-year colleges

(Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Perhaps not surprisingly then, many of the institutional factors shown to impact postsecondary success are of limited applicability to two-year schools. For example, many researchers have examined the impact of college selectivity (e.g., Alexander & Eckland, 1977; Astin & Henson, 1977; Pascarella, Smart, Ethington, & Nettles, 1987). But two-year colleges generally rely on only minimal selection criteria, and often have open admissions (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Person & Rosenbaum, 2003). Similarly, while studies of institutional control have consistently shown a net positive effect for private schools (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the causal mechanisms identified as potentially important—e.g., their residential nature, their religious affiliations—are unlikely to apply to most private two-year institutions (which are usually secular and non-residential). At least two characteristics of private colleges, however, might matter for two-year as well as four-year schools: their distinct mission (Bailey et al., 2002; Clark, 1972), and their higher tuition costs (Manski & Wise, 1983). Yet research has not examined these characteristics among two-year schools.

The few studies of institutional characteristics at two-year colleges have tended to rely on small and/or geographically limited samples (Bailey et al., 2002; Forrest, 1985; Hedlund & Jones, 1970; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Person & Rosenbaum, 2004), so it is unclear whether their findings are generalizable. Still, these studies identify important areas for new inquiry. Specifically, they suggest that persistence at two-year colleges may be impacted by institutional structures like the support provided by student services (Hedlund & Jones, 1970), the availability of advising, and instructional emphasis and practical applicability (Forrest, 1985; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Person & Rosenbaum, 2004). Inquiry into such institutional characteristics is also supported theoretically. Testing the utility of the Tinto model among non-traditional students (including older, non-residential, and part-time students especially—all of

whom represent large portions of two-year college enrollments), Bean and Metzner (1985) conclude that because non-traditional students are less socially integrated in college, academic integration becomes more important in predicting persistence. Institutional characteristics, such as those noted above, may foster academic integration and they are amenable to policy reforms. The influence of such characteristics, however, has not been tested on a nationally representative sample of two-year colleges.

It is somewhat disheartening that Pascarella (1985)—perhaps the scholar who has concerned himself most with the effects of postsecondary institutional characteristics—once concluded that “the magnitude of [institutional effects] was quite small... perhaps even trivial in terms of meaningful influence on learning and achievement” (p. 20). In a careful review of the literature, however, he notes several methodological problems that may have obscured the institutional effects of college, net of student attributes. In addition to the problem of small and geographically limited samples, discussed above, researchers have also operationalized institutional characteristics differently, and possibly in ways that are too far removed from students’ actual college experiences (e.g., total budget expenditures). And since different students will certainly fare differently in varied institutional environments, a third methodological problem is the failure of many studies to systematically examine student-institution interaction effects.

(b) Proposal of work:

I propose to use the Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (BPS: 1996/2001), and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data sets to investigate the institutional factors that affect student success in sub-baccalaureate education. These data sets are large and comprehensive and, with weights, are nationally representative,

enhancing the generalizability of findings, as well as allowing for testing of conditional effects. In order to address concerns voiced by Pascarella (1985) and others (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) regarding the indirect nature of institutional effects, I will approach the analysis using path modeling techniques. Drawing on the theoretical foundations and empirical findings noted above, I will test a two-stage model integrating the theoretical models of Tinto (1987; 1993), Bean (1980; 1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985), and Pascarella (1985). It should be noted that prior literature has also integrated the models (Cabrera et al., 1992; 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Together, these models (and the literature that has respectively validated them) hypothesize a path, whereby student characteristics and institutional characteristics influence students' academic and social integration and commitment. Integration and commitment then influence persistence and eventual attainment. Furthermore, since different students are expected to have varying needs, which may be met by different institutional arrangements, I will also include student-institution interaction effects.

In the first phase of my analysis, I will use multivariate weighted least squares regression to determine which individual and institutional factors influence the dependent variables of student integration and commitment. In the second phase, I will use binary logistic regression to estimate the effects of the covariates (now including student integration and commitment as predictors) on the probability, first, of persistence at the institution, and second, of degree completion. Consistent with past research (Cabrera et al., 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella, 1985), individual-level control variables will include student gender, race, socioeconomic background, parent education, and past achievement. I will also control for student aspirations, since community colleges, in particular, enroll many students who do not plan to complete any degree (Pascarella, 1985). Since two-year college students are often non-

traditional, their external commitments should also be controlled (Bean & Metzner, 1985), e.g., the presence of dependent children, jobs, etc. Finally, I will include the quasi-structural variables of student satisfaction with institutional resources, which have been shown to function as important indicators of student-environment fit (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In my own preliminary analyses of the data, I have found that the BPS contains detailed information on all these variables, and the sample size for two-year students is considerable, ranging from about 1700 to 2400, depending on the particular analysis.

Institutional covariates will be drawn from both BPS and IPEDS, and will be merged into a single data set. These variables—indicated by prior research, though not often tested, especially at the sub-baccalaureate level—will include but not necessarily be limited to: institutional control, the availability of resources dedicated to student services, instructional mode, school and program size, cost-aid and student-teacher ratios, and the racial and ethnic composition of the campus. Unlike many prior studies, I will also control for the student's major (provided in BPS), since program structures, requirements, time-tables, and pay-offs often vary in critical ways among the different majors (Pascarella, 1985; Person & Rosenbaum, 2003; 2004). (See the Appendix for an illustration of the proposed path model.)

The complex sampling strategy of the BPS—with different probabilities of selection at both the institutional and individual levels (NCES, 2002)—prompts certain methodological considerations. In order to support projection of findings from the sample to the broader population of first-time college students at two-year schools, BPS cross-sectional weights will be applied. Furthermore, clustering in the sample will yield underestimated standard errors, increasing the likelihood of a Type I error (i.e., incorrectly rejecting the null hypothesis). To

avoid this, I will need to adjust standard errors by multiplying each by the square-root of the design effect.

Of course, no study is without certain limitations. First, the BPS sample consists solely of *first-time beginners* in postsecondary education. Students who may have stopped out of college before—which is common, especially at the sub-baccalaureate level (Adelman, 1992)—are not included. Still, the success of students' initial college entry is an important topic, and this is the focus of the proposed study.

A second limitation relates to the BPS sample size of students at two-year institutions (N=2432). While this is larger than many past studies, some analyses may be affected by missing data or by small numbers of students. For example, I have conducted research using my own primary data that indicates distinct trends among Hispanic public community college students versus Hispanics at private occupational colleges. The BPS may not include enough Hispanic students in some institution types to detect similar effects with statistical significance. I will use common data cleaning techniques to handle missing data, such as creating categorical dummy variables with a category for missing data (e.g., race, gender); replacing missing data with mean values where appropriate (e.g., parent education and income); etc.

Third, even though IPEDS includes a richer variety of data on institutional characteristics than BPS alone, it does not offer some kinds of institutional information that I would like to examine, based on prior work with my local sample of 14 two-year colleges. For example, the IPEDS data indicate whether academic or career counseling is available at a school, but not whether students are *required* to see their advisor, which I have found to be an important influence on student outcomes in my own sample (Person & Rosenbaum, 2003; 2004). This prior research will, nevertheless, inform my interpretation of the results from the national data,

shedding light on what the IPEDS variables represent in terms of actual college practices observed and measured in our local interviews and surveys.

(c) Dissemination plan:

I am strongly committed to disseminating the results of this study to a wide variety of outlets. I have already done this with the results of my prior research, presenting at professional meetings and policy conferences, as well as publishing in professional and practitioners' journals (see Biographical Sketch). I hope to publish the proposed study in a top academic journal, such as the *Journal of Higher Education* or *Sociology of Education*, as well as including it as a chapter in my dissertation, which I plan to complete by June 2005. Prior to publication, however, I anticipate presenting my research to my peers in academia, as well as to policy makers, so that my own research may benefit from the rich perspectives of such audiences. As I have done with past research, I plan to present the findings from this study at the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (April 2005) and/or the American Sociological Association (August 2005), as well as to the 2005 AIR Annual Forum. My affiliation with the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at Northwestern University will provide me with a unique opportunity to disseminate the study among policy makers, through the Institute's Working Papers series, colloquia, and Policy Briefing series. These IPR venues are well established as important points of contact between academics and policy makers in education and beyond.

(d) Policy relevance:

This research will assist policy makers in developing institutional arrangements that can facilitate college persistence beyond the many interventions directed at changing student behaviors. The study's findings will be useful to both postsecondary administrators as well as public officials who make funding decisions for public college systems. Furthermore, if high

school counselors and college admissions counselors can have a better sense of the variety of institutional characteristics and how these may enhance different students' chances for college success, they can help students and their families to make more informed college enrollment choices. In a broader sense, any research that contributes to improving college attainment should enhance the knowledge and skills of the American labor force. Such gains in human capital would benefit not only the workers themselves, but also society more generally.

(e) Innovative aspects of the project:

Research generated by the theoretical contributions of both Tinto and Bean, as well as Pascarella, has provided a great deal of information on the processes that contribute to college student persistence. In response, college policy makers have introduced a host of interventions aimed at improving degree completion rates. While these interventions have sometimes included structural innovations—for example, the introduction of intensive orientation sessions for new students (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986)—we know less about the institutional factors that might enhance student persistence more directly. This is especially the case among sub-baccalaureate granting institutions, which enroll nearly half of all postsecondary students. This study will identify the cluster of institutional variables that are associated with enhanced student persistence, as well as the shedding light on the processes by which they may improve student outcomes. It will also increase understanding of how institutional structures and processes affect different students in different ways.

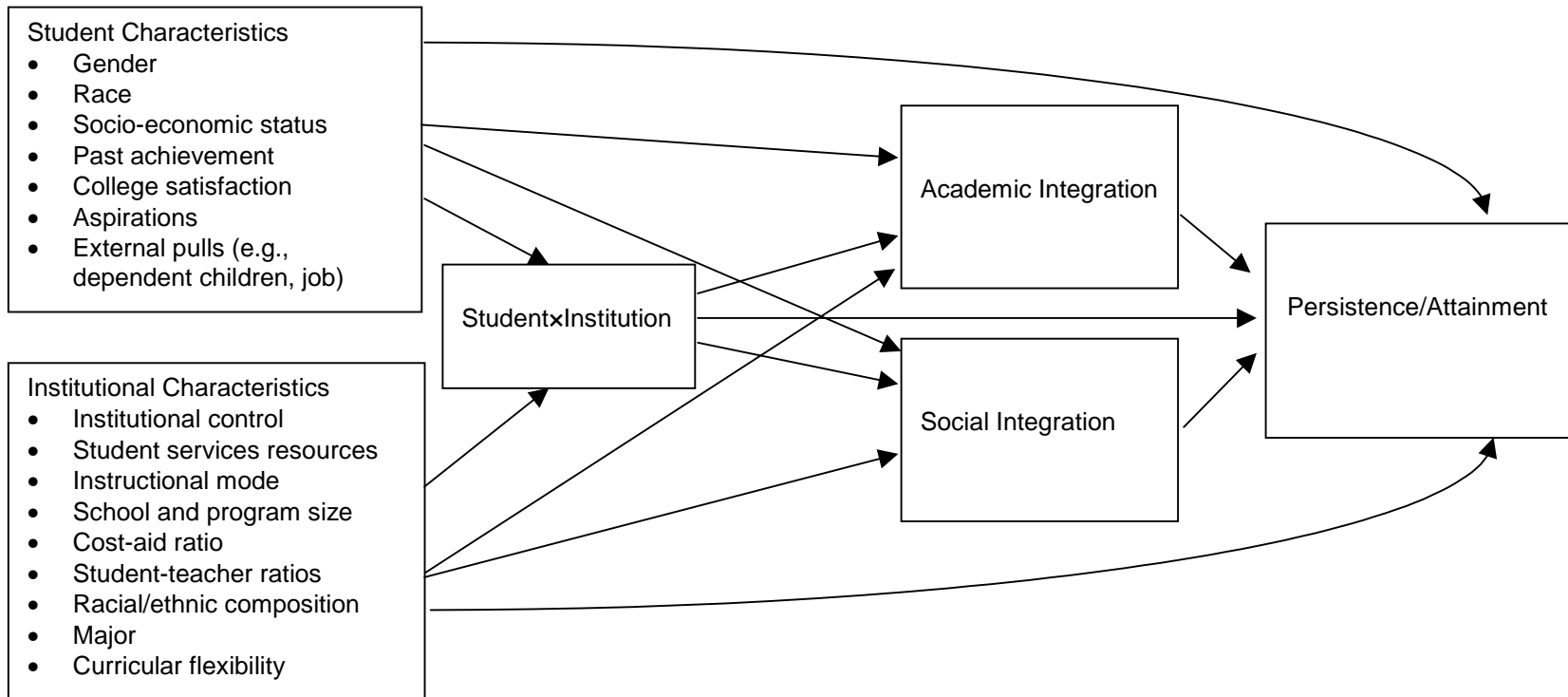
(f) Audience:

The most important audiences for this research are scholars and policy makers. The first group includes researchers in education, sociology, and organization development. Such scholars might be interested not only in the empirical findings of the study, but also its direct and

indirect testing of the institutional components of theories of student persistence. The latter group includes college administrators, as well as educators more generally, who hope to improve persistence and completion rates among their students. Finally, policy makers for whom this study will be useful also include public officials concerned about maximizing the return to public expenditures on postsecondary education and increasing the human capital of the nation's workers and citizens.

(g) Appendix

Proposed model: tests direct, indirect, and conditional (i.e., interaction) effects of student and institutional characteristics on educational outcomes. Adapted from Tinto (1987; 1993), Bean (1980; 1982), and Pascarella (1985).



Prior research (Person & Rosenbaum 2003; 2004) suggests that students with less familiarity with college environments (e.g., first generation, low income, etc.) and/or with high levels of external obligations (e.g., dependent children, jobs, etc.) will respond positively to highly structured institutional environments (e.g., less flexible curricula, fewer program offerings, high student services resources, etc.), because these reduce the likelihood of mistakes and the need for cultural capital. Institutional effects are largely indirect, operating through increased academic and social integration. Effects are also conditional (with individual and institutional characteristics interacting), given the diversity of student populations.

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6. Biographical Sketches

Principal Investigator (Applicant): Ann E. Person

Ann E. Person is a doctoral student in Human Development and Social Policy and a graduate research fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. She also holds a fellowship from the Spencer Research Training Grant.

Ms. Person works with Professor James Rosenbaum on the College to Careers study, which has been funded through grants from the Spencer Foundation and the Sloan Foundation. The study examines the college and labor market experiences of students in occupational programs at 14 two-year colleges in the Chicago metropolitan area; it includes extensive quantitative and qualitative data, with surveys of over 4000 students, and interviews with over 200 college students, faculty, and staff. Ms. Person's research has focused on two general themes: (1) how students' background and social networks influence their college and career choices; and (2) how postsecondary institutional structures affect students' experiences with college and the labor market. She has used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to examine these issues. Because the College to Careers institutional sample is limited to a single metropolitan area, Ms. Person plans to work with national data—including BPS and IPEDS—to replicate analyses and test hypotheses generated in her prior work. She plans to include such analyses in her dissertation, as a complement to her analyses of the College to Careers data.

Ms. Person's quantitative training includes coursework in basic and advanced statistics, regression analysis, longitudinal methods, and hierarchical linear modeling. In her course papers, she has conducted analyses using major national data sets, including the PSID, NLSY, HS&B, and NELS. She has worked with a variety of statistical software packages, including SPSS, STATA, SAS, and HLM2.

Ms. Person has presented papers at the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (April 2003 and April 2004) and the American Sociological Association (August 2003); at the Harvard Civil Rights Project's recent Roundtable on Community Colleges and Latino Educational Opportunity (October 2003); and will present at the March 2004 annual meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence. She has published in the journal *Professional School Counseling* (2003, April), and has submitted papers to the *Teachers College Record* (revised and resubmitted) and *Social Forces* (submitted).

Prior to coming to Northwestern, Ms. Person worked as a teacher and administrator in the Chicago Public Schools and for the University of Wyoming, where she was the Assistant Director of the School of Environment and Natural Resources. Her work as a college administrator, in particular, provides her with additional insights as she considers the structural issues associated with postsecondary student success. She holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from the University of Wyoming, where she was named the 1999 Milward Simpson Outstanding MPA Student. She received a Bachelor's degree (*cum laude*) in History from Georgetown University.

Representative papers and presentations include:

Articles:

- Person, A. E. (2004). When Does Heterogamy Create Problems for Couples? Religion and Gender in Belief and Practice. Unpublished manuscript, submitted to *Social Forces*.
- Person, A. E., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2004). Student information problems in different college structures. Unpublished manuscript, revised and resubmitted to *Teachers College Record*.

- Rosenbaum, J. E., & Person, A. E. (2003). Beyond college for all: Policies and practices to improve transitions into college and jobs. *Professional School Counseling, 6*, 252-260.

Conference presentations:

- Person, A. E., Deil-Amen, R. J., & Rosenbaum, J. E., (2003, April). *What lies along the extra mile: Labor market linkage activities among two-year college faculty*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Person, A. E. & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2003, August). *Student goals, mistakes, and plans in differing institutional settings: A study of two-year colleges*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, GA.

Faculty Dissertation Director: James E. Rosenbaum, Ph.D.

James E. Rosenbaum is Professor of Sociology, Education, and Social Policy at the School of Education and Social Policy and the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. His main areas of interest are education, work, careers and the life course, and social stratification. His recently published a book, *Beyond College for All*, on the school-to-work transition for high school students, won the ASA Willard Waller Award for Distinguished Scholarship in the sociology of education, and has been widely discussed among educators and policy makers.

Professor Rosenbaum is currently the principal investigator for the College to Careers study, which examines the transition to work among two-year college students. He has presented findings from this study to the Russell Sage Foundation and, recently, to a conference of over 100 college presidents meeting at the Aspen Institute. His research has been described in front-

page articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*; featured in national news magazines, radio, and television; and discussed by the national presidents of the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association. He has served on national panels and on the steering committee for the superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools. He is President-Elect of the Sociology of Education Section of the ASA, and Chair of the Program on Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University.

7. Budget

Graduate stipend		
(\$1588/month, December, 2004-May 2005)	\$	9528
Fringe costs (23.48%)		2237
Tuition (\$920/quarter, Winter-Spring 2005)		1840
Travel/lodging/meals		
AIR Annual Forum		900
AERA Annual Meeting		495
TOTAL BUDGET REQUEST	\$	15000

8. Current and Pending Support

I am currently funded through a Spencer Research Training Grant (STRG), ending November 30, 2004.

9. Facilities, Equipment, and Other Resources

Access to a computer with appropriate statistics software and other office equipment is provided through Dr. Rosenbaum's College to Careers project. I am included on the Faculty Dissertation Director's NCES restricted-use data license, and our facilities meet NCES security requirements for use of restricted data.

10. Supplementary Documentation:**Letter of recommendation from Faculty Dissertation Director**

To Whom It May Concern:

I write to recommend Ann Person for an AIR dissertation fellowship. Over the last 20 years, I have directed dissertation research for many excellent doctoral students at Yale and Northwestern Universities, many who have gone on to highly productive careers in educational research. I have come to know Ann Person very well over the past three years, and she is among the five best students I have ever advised.

As a former college instructor and administrator, Ann came to graduate school with a good understanding about many aspects of higher education. Although she entered graduate training with a primary interest in qualitative research (which she does very well), Ann understood the importance of learning advanced statistical methods and of using large data sets. She has taken several difficult quantitative methods courses with highly demanding instructors, she has mastered difficult material, and she has used this knowledge to produce excellent research papers, some of which have been presented at national professional meetings and submitted to professional journals.

Ann is extremely versatile. She has strong social skills, she contributes actively to seminars, she is an excellent interviewer, and she has handled the difficult task of initiating our institutional contacts with top administrators at community colleges. She is well read, intellectually curious, and thinks well. In seminars, Ann can be counted on to ask the best questions about theory, quantitative methods, or qualitative methods. She writes well, and is generous about giving editorial comments. Ann is also extremely motivated. She reads voraciously and she is capable of working long hours before a project is due. She is well-organized, however, so she completes projects before final deadlines, reducing anxiety among co-workers and resulting in better quality reports.

When I have a student as outstanding as this, I struggle to make my reference letter convincing. How can I illustrate how good she is? First, as chairman of the program, I see other faculty's evaluations of all students, and Ann Person is rated as one of the strongest students in the entire program by virtually every faculty member, including Greg Duncan, who teaches the difficult economics class. Second, as President-elect of the Sociology of Education section of ASA, and as a faculty adviser who plans to have other good students in the future, I would not risk tarnishing my reputation and the value of my future recommendations, so I wouldn't make such enthusiastic claims if I had any doubts--but I have total confidence in Ann's capabilities. Third, I have seen her present at national meetings and I've seen the response of the panel members, discussants, and audiences. She speaks clearly and effectively, and she answers questions well. I am sure that anyone who has seen her present has been impressed. Fourth, her record speaks for itself in many ways. I list some highlights: strong academic skills (4.0 graduate GPA); extensive coursework in quantitative methodologies; work with several NCES data sets--wrote at least one paper on each; collection and analysis of our own primary College to Careers survey and interview data.

In sum, Ann Person is a truly outstanding student who has enormous potential as an educational researcher. She clearly gets a great deal of enjoyment from working hard on research, and she's very good at it. I am confident that she will make enormous contributions to educational research in her dissertation and in her subsequent career. If you award her this fellowship, I am certain you will be pleased with the outcome.

Sincerely,

Prof. James Rosenbaum,
Chair, Program on Human Development and Social Policy.
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