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# ■ At Issue: A Comprehensive Review and Synthesis of the Literature on Late Registration

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*Using a literature review taxonomy described by Cooper and Hedges (2009), an analysis of 32 publicly available studies of late registrations was conducted to provide researchers and policymakers with an assessment of the extent, quality, and major findings of the studies. The reviewer asserted that few high-quality studies have been conducted on late registration, and the research does not provide strong evidence that late registration is associated with poor student outcomes. The review provided answers to the following questions: What does the body of research on late registration indicate about the advisability of retaining it as an option for students? What research methods—and of what quality—have been employed? What research remains to be done? What are the implications for policy and college operations?*

Although definitions and policies vary, late registration generally refers to the practice of registering for a class after the start date for the semester (O'Banion, 2012). Some policymakers and practitioners laud late registration for granting access to students who otherwise would not be able to enroll in a given semester (Weiss, 1999), while others derogate late registration as detrimental to students and institutions (O'Banion, 2012). The issue is of particular importance in the current community college context because of increasing scrutiny and assessment of student success (American, 2013). A number of theoretical models have been proposed for understanding student success or persistence. For example, Tinto (1993) focused on academic and social integration, while Bean and Metzner (1985) investigated the importance of the educational envi-

ronment. Although personal factors may be the primary determinants of student attrition (Cotnam & Ison, 1988), institutions can also influence student success (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). One can therefore infer from student success theory that late registration may have a negative effect on student engagement and the educational environment within which students pursue goals.

## Purpose

There seems to be gathering momentum for critically reexamining the policy that allows students to register late for classes (Center, 2012; Shriner, 2014). A comprehensive synthesis of more than 50 years of research on late registration has the potential to identify salient findings as well as trends in the kinds of questions posed and the methods for addressing those questions.

## Method

### Theoretical Approach

Cooper and Hedges (2009) proposed a taxonomy of six characteristics of a literature review: focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience. Table 1 summarizes the approach taken in this review. An integration goal of a review can include “formulating general statements that characterize multiple specific instances” (p. 4). The neutral perspective indicates that the reviewer does not begin with an *a priori* assumption or argument, although it does not preclude the reviewer from offering summative judgments based on the evidence. This review will be exhaustive within the parameters noted below; however, for the sake of brevity purposeful sampling will be used when citing specific examples.

**Table 1.** *Taxonomy of Late Registration Literature Review (adapted from Cooper & Hedges, 2009)*

Characteristic	Approach
Foci	Research methods; findings
Goals	Integration; identification of central issues
Perspective	Neutral representation
Coverage	Exhaustive
Organization	Conceptual
Audience	General scholars, policy makers, and practitioners



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## Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Included in this literature review were qualitative and/or quantitative investigations at colleges and universities of one or more of the following aspects of late registration: frequency of occurrence of late registration; characteristics of students who register late; reasons students register late; student, faculty, staff, and administrator attitudes toward late registration; and associations between late registration behavior and academic performance. Studies which examined registration timing as a continuous variable without discriminating between on-time and late registration were excluded because they did not provide evidence specifically related to late registration. The sources of the studies included in this review were journal articles, dissertations, and reports that were publicly available in January 2014. The initial search was conducted using Boolean terms “late enroll\*” and “late regist\*” in the EBSCOhost and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses databases. A secondary search was applied to the reference lists of the sources yielded in the initial search. In sum, 32 studies matched the inclusion/exclusion criteria, nearly half of which were produced in the last 10 years.<sup>1</sup>

## Definition and Teleology of Late Registration

There is not a single operational definition of late registration; however, it is permitted at most colleges and typically refers to registering late for one or more classes after the semester has begun (Dunn & Mays, 2004; O'Banion, 2007; Shriner, 2014). Smith, Street, and Olivarez (2002) explained that the two primary purposes of late registration in community colleges are to serve the open access mission and to capture more enrollments. Tincher-Ladner (2006) demonstrated that late registrants added a net of 2.5% full-time equivalent students (FTEs) at Mississippi Gulf Coast College from 2002 to 2004.

Weiss (1999) argued that late registration provides access for students whose momentum would otherwise be interrupted; when a college cancels a class or students' employment circumstances change, late registration enables them to adjust their schedules and progress through programs in a timely manner (Keck, 2007; Zottos, 2005). Even O'Banion (2007), one of the harshest critics of late registration, acknowledged that it aligns with students' self-directed desires to select “more accommodat-

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1 Hale's dissertation (*The impact of timing of registration on student learning outcomes at three rural community colleges*, 2007) was not included in this review because of apparent anomalies in the reported data.

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ing times, more useful courses, and better teachers" (p. 720). Students have indicated that it is both a "viable and *critical* option" for them, and they expressed satisfaction with their late registration decisions (Keck, 2007, p. 132, emphasis added).

## Research Designs

The research designs of the 32 studies included in this review of literature varied considerably, making comparisons among them challenging and final conclusions about the advisability of late registration policies elusive.

## Definitions

The starting point for any study should be establishing the parameters for or definition of late registration. Only 3 of the 32 studies explicitly defined and assessed late registration as enrollment into a class after the first class meeting (Belcher & Patterson, 1990; Keck, 2007; Zottos, 2005), the definition that makes the most theoretical sense in terms of the presumed mechanism for how late registration affects academic performance (Roueche & Roueche, 1994). Based on student self-reports, Belcher and Patterson (1990) found that 9% of those registering after the semester was under way were nevertheless registering before the first meeting of the class which calls into question results reported in the 16 studies that defined late registration as enrollment on or after the first day of the semester, but not necessarily after the first class meeting. Three studies did not provide a clear operational definition of late registration.

## Population, Time Frame, and Unit of Analysis

Researchers in the vast majority of studies ( $N = 27$ ) drew some or all of their data from community colleges. Most used census populations, sometimes comparing groups of greatly different sizes or subgroups of sizes so small that the credibility of reported conclusions is subject to debate (e.g., Keck, 2007; Stein, 1984; Tincher-Ladner, 2006; cf. Cohen, 1992; Field, 2007). Populations ranged from six interviewees in Bryant, Daley, Fleming, and Somers' qualitative study (1996) to over a quarter of a million students in a longitudinal study of 109 California community colleges (Moore & Shulock, 2007). Most studies did not adjust for the representativeness of their samples in relation to the populations to which inferences were drawn.

Researchers typically investigated student performance over a semester or academic year. Moore and Shulock (2007) commendably tracked stu-



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dents from fall 1999 through spring 2005, but the 14-year retrospective in Diekhoff (1992) should cause one to wonder if all other factors were stable enough during that period to justify inferences.

The unit of analysis has an important effect on the cogency of findings (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004), but it was a relative weakness in the studies overall. In only one-fourth of the studies was each class enrollment investigated for the relationship between late registration and academic performance. In other studies of student outcomes ( $N = 22$ ), each student's overall performance in a semester or year was tracked, which is theoretically sound if a student registered late for all classes, but it's important to note that this is a different phenomenon than adding or switching individual classes during the late registration period.

## **Analytic Methods**

Although most researchers used appropriate or adequate statistical methodologies, some procedures appeared untenable. For example, Stein (1984) proffered a questionable comparison of late registrant retention data from 1984 to on-time registrant data from 1973, 1976, and 1979. Other studies treated grades as a continuous variable (e.g., Maalouf, 2012), but an argument can be made that the variable of discrete grades (A, B, C, D, F), as opposed to grade point average (GPA), should be treated as categorical (Field, 2009; Knapp 1990). In a few studies (e.g., Sova, 1986) conclusions were reached without testing for statistical significance.

## **What is the Frequency of Late Registration?**

Based on 15 data points in 11 studies, the median of students who registered late for all classes was 6.8% ( $M = 8.1\%$ ;  $R: 1.6\text{--}16.8\%$ ). In the seven studies which reported late registration in terms of enrollments into individual classes, the median was 9.9% ( $M = 13\%$ ;  $R: 3\text{--}27\%$ ). Although Zottos (2005) suggested that most students engage in late registration behaviors at some point in their academic careers, in one Community College Survey of Student Engagement (Center, 2012) 11% of student respondents at 435 colleges reported they had registered after the first class meeting for at least one class (Center, 2012). It would seem reasonable to conclude that the frequency of late registration behavior is relatively low at around 10%; furthermore, most students do not continually enroll late (Mendiola-Perez, 2004).

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## Who Registers Late and Why?

The most common demographic findings in the studies were that late registrants were disproportionately male (nine studies, e.g., Chilton, 1964); nontraditional age (five studies, e.g., Mendiola-Perez, 2004), African American (seven studies, e.g., Moore & Shulock, 2007), Hispanic (three studies, e.g., Street, 2000), and enrolled part-time (seven studies, e.g., Mannan & Preusz, 1976). However, other researchers have reported different findings, including for sex (six studies, e.g., Wang & Pilarzyk, 2007), race/ethnicity (four studies, e.g., Perkins, 2002), and part-time enrollment (Keck, 2007). Overall, a stable demographic profile of late registrants has not emerged because of significant variation in individual behavior, college cultures, and definitions of late registration. Chilton (1964) did not find notable personality differences between on-time registrants and late registrants; however, this suggests an area for further research given theoretical constructs and studies outside the field of late registration which postulate a connection between psychological/personality characteristics and academic performance (Astin, 1993; Grimes & David, 1999; Sénécal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995).

The most common reasons students cited for registering late were college policy and paperwork obstacles, medical issues, financial difficulties, employment conflicts, transportation problems, and general life circumstances (e.g., Chilton, 1964; Keck, 2007; Maalouf, 2012). Morris' survey of students (1986) indicated that schedule conflicts were the main reason nearly half of students changed classes, whereas only 4% cited issues of personal convenience. Speculation by Zottos (2005) that "limited knowledge about how colleges function" (p. 101) caused some students to register late is supported by Maalouf's finding (2012) that more than one-third of late registrants were not aware classes were already in progress. More positively, Keck's interviews with students (2007) revealed that when making decisions about late registration they took into account "their individual backgrounds, strengths, academic abilities, and determination to complete a course" (p. 126). For example, students reported avoiding late registration into online classes or classes for which they did not already have an academic or experiential background.

## How Well Do Late Registrants Perform?

The issue of most importance in the research on late registration is whether it affects student success (Summers, 2000). In assessing the relationship between late registration and academic performance, researchers



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have focused on three outcomes: grades, successful class completion, and withdrawal/attrition.

## **Grades**

Although researchers for six studies reported negative associations between late registration and semester GPA (e.g., Mannan & Preusz, 1976), in seven other studies researchers cautioned that negative effects were mixed, minimal, or less important than factors such as being male, non-traditional aged, part-time, African American, or having a lower high school GPA (e.g., Hiller, 2005; Summers, 2000). Adjusting for selected student characteristics, Zottos (2005) did not find a significant effect on semester GPA; nor did Perkins (2002). When adjusting for age and number of hours taken, Street (2000) concluded that late registration was associated with lower semester GPA for returning students, but not for new students. By contrast, Chilton (1964) found that late registering sophomores performed as well as on-time registrants, but late registering freshmen performed worse. Data from Stein's study (1984) showed that late registrants were 9.4 percentage points more likely to earn a semester GPA of 0.0 but also 10.4 percentage points more likely to earn a semester GPA of 4.0. Importantly, although late registration into a class often represents a change in class section rather than a new class added, Summers (2000) concluded that changing class sections had no effect on a student's semester GPA. Researchers in five studies looked specifically at the effect of late enrollment into a class on the grade for that class. While Keck (2007) and Safer (2009) found negative associations between late registration into a class and the grade for that class, Angelo (1990) and Diekhoff (1992) could not document a correlation, and Maalouf (2012) reported that a negative relationship was very weak. Thus, there is not enough consistent evidence to conclude that late registration negatively affects students' grades.

## **Successful Class Completion**

Angelo (1990) notably concluded that late registrants were *more likely* to successfully complete the class (not earn a failing, incomplete, or withdrawal grade) into which they registered late, a result confirmed by Keck (2007) for students registering late for five or six classes, but not for one to four classes. Although Sova found a significant negative association between late registration and class completion, Zottos (2005) found no significant association. Tompkins (2013) reported a very weak relationship between late registration and course completion using a predictive model



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that held constant sex, race, age, full-time enrollment status, on-campus and online course delivery, and whether the student had previously completed a study skills course.

Turning to the association of late registration with successful completion of all classes in a semester, about which there has been more research, results were again mixed, particularly if personal and academic factors were considered (Cornille, 2009; Zottos, 2005). Summers (2000) even discovered that as the number of late added classes increased so did the likelihood of completing all classes in the semester. Negative associations between late registration and the completion rate for all classes were reported in six studies (e.g., Bolt, 2013), weak associations in two studies (Cornille, 2009; McWaine, 2012), and no statistically significant differences in two studies (Mendiola-Perez, 2004; Perkins, 2002). Although Cornille (2009) reported a weak negative effect on course completion, he also noted that late registrants were more likely to complete 100% of their courses, which echoes bifurcated results for GPA reported by Stein. In all, there is some evidence linking late registration to weaker completion rates, but that evidence is far from uniform, particularly in light of substantial variation in the quality of theoretical models and research methods employed in the studies.

### **Withdrawal/Attrition**

Withdrawal might be considered a species of unsuccessful class completion, but a student can fail to successfully complete a class (e.g., earn a grade of "D" or "F") without withdrawing from it. Keck (2007) concluded that late registrants were significantly more likely to withdraw from the class for which they registered late, while Safer (2009) only found a significant negative effect in large classes, and Diekhoff (1992) only found a negative effect in classes where there was a restrictive attendance policy. Sova (1986) observed that late registrants were no more likely than on-time registrants to withdraw from a college composition course, but were more likely to withdraw from a developmental writing course.

When the proportion of all classes that late registrants withdrew from was calculated, significant negative associations were reported in four studies (e.g., Tincher-Ladner, 2006), but Neighbors (1996) and Mendiola-Perez (2004) found no statistically significant difference. Looking at the frequency of withdrawal from every class in a semester, although Parks (1974) documented a statistically significant negative association between late registration and semester withdrawal, Chilton (1964) did not find a relationship, Peterson (1986) noted the withdrawal rate was very low, and

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Cornille (2009) declared that the relationship he discovered was small and not meaningful. The evidence for the effect of late registration on student persistence into subsequent semesters is inconclusive, with negative associations reported in six studies (e.g., Stein, 1984), very weak or no statistically significant differences reported in four studies (e.g., McWaine, 2012), and Hiller (2005) declaring that other factors were better predictors of negative influences on persistence. Taken together, researchers have documented some negative associations between late registration and student outcomes, but the evidence is not decisive. As Smith, Street, and Olivarez (2002) noted, findings were often confounded by too many other factors, from age to the number of classes added.

## Summary

O'Banion (2012) claimed that evidence is "overwhelming" that allowing students to register late for one or more classes leads to worse student outcomes; this review of the literature sought to investigate the warrant for O'Banion's claim. Applying Cooper and Hedges' (2009) taxonomy for literature reviews, 32 studies of late registration were coded and collated. A summary of late registration definitions, policies, and purposes grounded the review. Studies were analyzed in terms of their research designs and findings.

The definitions of late registration in the studies varied considerably in relevance and clarity, raising the first substantive difficulty when comparing findings. The unit of analysis is a crucial distinction among studies: some used summative student statistics such as semester GPA, while others used data from each course, such as the grade earned in a class by a student who registered late for that class. Similarly, the quality of study methodologies was uneven.

Although data were sparse, the frequency of occurrence of late registration is probably somewhere around 10%. There does not seem to be a stable demographic profile of the late registrant, but there is some evidence that it is skewed towards student characteristics that are associated with elevated risk for poor academic outcomes. The numerous reasons students register late generally fall into categories of institutional barriers, unpredictable and uncontrollable life issues, and personal decisions. Students are typically satisfied with their late registration decisions, and it is an important access and success opportunity for many.

No consistent association between late registration behavior and student grades, successful course completion rates, and withdrawal/attri-



tion rates was present in the literature. Although negative associations were common, most researchers reported mixed results, weak or slight correlations, and negative effects which were mitigated or superseded by other factors such as a student's demographic characteristics. Angelo concluded that institutions "no longer need concern themselves that [late registration] is endangering the academic success of . . . students" (p. 327). Peterson (1986) used results from her study to put forward an argument for continuing late registration at Honolulu Community College, and Zottos (2005) asserted that late registration "within a reasonable time-frame" effectively serves students (p. 101).

These conclusions seem to be at odds with anecdote and intuition (Angelo, 1990; Weiss, 1999). When Perkins found that there were no statistically significant differences in the outcomes of on-time and late registrants, personnel at her college were, in the words of one, "completely knocked over by the findings . . . That just goes against everything that the faculty I know would say" (Perkins, 2002, p. 80). This may explain some confirmation bias in the literature (e.g., O'Banion, 2012; Sinclair, 2005). Indeed, O'Banion's (2012) citation of Zottos (2005) to argue evidence is "overwhelming" (p. 28) that late registration negatively affects student success was counterfactual to Zottos' conclusion: "since no significant associations were found regarding late registration, no true policy implications can be generated" (p. 101).

## Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

In recent years, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners have criticized late registration for inhibiting student success and compromising the ethical duties of colleges. However, more studies included recommendations to retain late registration than to ban it (Table 2). The only "overwhelming" conclusion was that colleges should investigate and selectively modify late registration policies and those policies and procedures that have the potential to improve the academic achievement of late registrants. In this context, the following actions seem apposite:

**Table 2.** *Summary of Policy Recommendations from Studies of Late Registration*

Ban LR	Maybe Ban LR	Ban LR for Some	No Change / Keep LR	Modify Policies	No Clear Recommendation
3	4	3	6	19	7

*Note:* LR = late registration. The total number of recommendations is greater than the number of studies reviewed because some researchers issued recommendations in more than one category.



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1. Conduct research at the local level, given empirical findings that late registration behaviors and associations with student outcomes vary among colleges, academic disciplines, and student groups.
  2. Conduct research on student success with clear and tenable definitions of variables, careful selection of sample populations, and best practice in statistical methods and analyses.
  3. Create a culture of early and on-time registration through improved policies, procedures, and coordination among students, staff, faculty, and administrators.
  4. Develop policies that accommodate students for whom late registration is likely beneficial but that deter late registration when the outcomes are likely to be negative.
  5. Target support services to meet the particular needs of students who register late.
  6. Use rolling schedules where new classes begin every week of the semester to eliminate late registration not by prohibition but by ensuring a class is almost always imminently available for students whenever they register.
  7. Conduct high-quality studies on the effect of the elimination of late registration on students and institutions.

The above actions target improved understanding of and service to student needs. Collectively, they hold promise for delivering significantly better outcomes at significantly lower costs for students, institutions, and taxpayers.

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