7. PERCEIVED (ACADEMIC) CONTROL AND SCHOLASTIC ATTAINMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION*

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The geopolitical climate of late 18th century France described by Charles Dickens as “the best of times, the worst of times” is no less true today of postsecondary institutions in North America. “The best of times” are seen in the dramatic expansion of the postsecondary education system in the last 50 years — more openings are available and a greater diversity of groups have access to those openings. In Canada, for example, the number of undergraduate students increased from approximately 115,000 in 1960 to almost 850,000 in 2000, while Canada’s population grew by less than 2-fold (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2003; Clifton, 2000; Sokoloff, 2004). During this same period, female undergraduate participation rates have risen from less than 25% in 1960, to 50% in 1980, and over 57% in 2000 (Clifton, 2000; Sokoloff, 2004). Compared to the 4-fold increase for male undergraduates, the number of female undergraduates increased by more than 14 times. Participation

* The research described here was supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (91–1296; 95–0152; 99–0433; 2003–0059), the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany), and the Max Planck Society (Germany) to the senior author, and doctoral fellowships from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to the two junior authors. The efforts of Steve Hladkyj, Verena Menec, and Ward Struthers in the coordination and development of the Motivation and Academic Achievement (MAACH) Research Laboratory described here are greatly appreciated, as are the contributions of many others who participated. Raymond Currie, Dean of Arts (1991 to 1999) provided critical institutional support to the overall development of this research and Judy G. Chipperfield contributed insightful ideas concerning various research projects. Please address correspondence to Raymond P. Perry, Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, CANADA, R3T 2N2. Email: rperry@cc.umanitoba.ca. The MAACH research group web site can be found at the following address: http://www.umanitoba.ca/ faculties/arts/psychology/maach


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rates in the U.S. postsecondary education system are comparable (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004).

With an expanding postsecondary system comes substantial economic benefits for students as well as for the broader society. According to Paulsen (1998), earnings for male college students were superior to high-school-educated males, when all fields and levels of experience are combined, by 40% in 1963, 48% in 1971, and 58% in 1989 (Murphy and Welch, 1992). Studies of identical twins indicate that earnings increase roughly 12% to 16% with each additional year of college education (Ashenfelter and Krueger, 1994; Miller, Mulvey, and Martin, 1995). Moreover, the type of college plays an instrumental role in the occupational status attained by students in professional and nonprofessional jobs (Smart, 1986) and in their eventual income levels (Smart, 1988). Within the broader societal context, Leslie and Slaughter (1992) showed that each $1 million invested by a four-year college in its budget results in $1.8 million in additional business spending and 53 new jobs, with similar figures reported by Creech, Carpenter, and Davis (1994).

Meanwhile, “the worst of times” are reflected in the accelerating failure rates and the decreasing quality of graduates. An unacceptable number of undergraduates leave college prematurely and many new graduates are deficient in basic numeracy and literacy skills that were commonplace decades ago. Surveys of participation rates in U.S. postsecondary institutions show that approximately 50% of graduating high school students enroll in college, but of these, 27% leave at the end of their first year, and fewer than 55% of those remaining graduate after five years (Desruisseaux, 1998; Geraghty, 1996). Of every 100 high school students in Grade 11, no more than 14 will graduate from college after five years. Figures for Canadian postsecondary institutions are equally disconcerting, as for example, at our own university, only 55% of first-year students will graduate within six years after entering their respective undergraduate programs.

More opportunity to pursue postsecondary studies, it would seem, is inextricably linked to a higher incidence of failure — an unanticipated nexus of access and failure that embraces both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. Greater institutional choice also means that college students have more responsibility for their academic development. Never before have personal autonomy, independence, and self-reliance played such a large role in college students’ educational experiences. In this context, we view quality of educational experience broadly in terms of teaching and learning processes that promote academic motivation and