Questions in Politics
The Journal of the Georgia Political Science Association
Volume II

Modeling Student Success: How Model UN Programs Can Enhance Performance and Persistence

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Scholars and universities have made substantial efforts to resolve the student departure puzzle, yet it remains one of higher education's greatest dilemmas. Evidence suggests student persistence is closely connected to social and academic integration. In this case study of a university's Model United Nations program, we investigate whether this program encourages student persistence. Using a mixed methods approach, we find participants in the program have higher graduation rates, graduate on time, and see significant improvement in their cumulative GPAs. We also find participation has a significant positive impact on social and academic integration, which helps increase retention. The authors recommend that universities invest in similar outside the classroom programs to increase student retention.

Although university administrators and scholars have been searching for theories, paradigms, and programs that lead to increased student success and retention, the student departure puzzle remains difficult to solve. This dilemma has led to the development of comprehensive means to properly measure retention, fully understand the problem, and help students persist from enrollment to degree completion. While this has steered the creation of diverse academic and support programs in higher education, there is limited research on preexisting college programs, beyond freshman seminars, that may help. We believe that the Model United Nations (Model UN) is one such program that can encourage student persistence and increase retention. Using a mixed methods approach including several measures widely found to increase retention, this article examines a university Model UN program with a study away component. It measures the program's impact on the degree to which students are integrated academically and socially. We argue that taking the students out of the physical classroom can lead to greater persistence toward graduation.

The university studied is a regional public university with an enrollment of just under 7,000 students. The average age for undergraduate students is 25 and minority enrollment currently stands at 34 percent. The university struggles with retention rates; at the beginning of the fall semester of the sophomore year, it loses approximately 32 percent of the cohort that began the previous fall as freshmen. Further, when this cohort reaches the four-year graduation checkpoint, the graduation rate is a mere 5.3 percent, with just 14 percent graduating in five years and 20.2 percent graduating in six. The university has identified lack of institutional connectedness as a primary factor in low retention. The only university housing accommodates fewer than 500 students and is located miles from the main campus. In a campus-wide survey, students indicated that they did not actively participate in university life outside the classroom such as student activities, sponsored events, athletic events, or intramurals.

Our research explores the impact of enrollment in a Model UN course on academic and social integration. The Model UN course includes participation in the National Model United Nations (NMUN) in New York City. We argue that since the class is a semester-long three-credit-hour program, students may be motivated to enroll for the credit, but the study away component facilitates a life outside the classroom that provides connectedness to the university, faculty, and fellow students. We posit that the trip component provides the students a unique view of the faculty and facilitates social and academic integration with students and faculty in a way that cannot be achieved in the traditional classroom setting.

Utilizing student graduation rates, cumulative grade point averages, reflective essays, and a pretest and posttest skills audit, we find the students experience significant improvement in both academic and social integration after completing the program. Our research adds to the literature on student persistence and retention by proposing that such programs encourage students to persist in college and to excel academically. We argue that these programs provide an exceptional educational experience, exposing students to diversity that they may not ordinarily experience, and we believe universities should invest greater time and resources into them.

Understanding Student Success: Persistence, Retention, Integration, and Study Abroad

Student success in college is measured by retention, persistence, and attrition rates (Noel 1985). Retention is a university measure of the percentage of students who continue in their education at the school (Wild and Ebbers 2002). A general conceptualization of retention is the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation (Berger, Ramírez, and Lyons 2012). Persistence is a measure of the desire and action of the student to stay from beginning year through degree completion (Berger, Ramírez, and Lyons 2012; Seidman 2005). Hagedorn (2012, 85) helped distinguish retention from persistence by writing, "institutions retain and students persist." Attrition refers to the decrease of the student body as a result of low retention rates (Hagedorn 2005). It denotes a student who has failed to re-enroll at an institution in consecutive semesters (Berger, Ramírez, and Lyons 2012).

Students cause positive attrition when they transfer to another school or discontinue their education after mastering a certain skill or meeting job requirements (Polinsky 2002–2003). Negative attrition is the result of several contributing factors. Students more likely to leave school are those who enter college with a low high school GPA, who have no stated goals for college or declared major (Fralick 1993), who have problems scheduling school around jobs, or who may be unhappy with professors' instruction methods (Polinsky 2002–2003). Zepke, Leach, and Prebble (2006, 597) found one-fifth of students who considered withdrawing from classes attributed this to "inadequate teaching, a lack of recognition of their learning needs and an absence of a sense of belonging."

Integration and Retention

Theories of college success incorporate factors that encourage students to continue to pursue their education. Tinto's (1975, 1987) Student Integration Model placed responsibility for retention on both individual students and

academic institutions. Together, the students and institution form a social and academic community, and students' integration into this community plays a significant role in retention. Tinto argued that students' success in both academic and social integration determines attrition; a student who is not integrated into the college community is less likely to finish college. Additionally, Bean and Eaton (2001–2002) reiterated that for students to be successful in college, and thus more likely to persist, students need to be academically and socially integrated. We therefore contend that both social and academic integration foster student retention.

Social Integration

According to Tinto (1975, 1987), measures of social integration include students' interaction with peers and involvement in extracurricular activities. Deil-Amen (2011, 87) also found a variety of social integration measures that affect persistence, including: participation in school clubs and fine arts events; sports; going out with friends from school; peer group interaction; and informal outside-the-classroom interaction with university agents. Studies also demonstrate that institutional agents like support staff, as well as contact with professors, increase social integration and influence retention. As Braxton and McClendon wrote (2001–2002, 57), "Social integration positively influences subsequent institutional commitment … and subsequent institutional commitment, in turn, positively affects persistence in college."

One area of social integration that can potentially affect persistence and retention is in regard to commuter students. While traditional students live in dorms and participate in campus life, commuter students maintain their previous social connections rather than making new ones. Often, commuter students do not have to adapt to the social norms of the university if they maintain their old attachments to family, work, or other previous commitments. Deil-Amen (2011, 61) found that for commuter students, 92 percent of students surveyed "highlighted a college specific 'agent' or 'agents' who were instrumental in their sense of adjustment, comfort, belonging, and competence as college students." Approximately 75 percent of students stated that the support and approachability of teachers and other students within the classrooms were fundamental to their comfort in college. Contact with faculty outside of class is also found to be important in student academic development and the decision to remain in college (Endo and Harpel 1982). Additionally, Graunke and Woosley (2005) found that greater satisfaction with the opportunities to interact with faculty had a significant impact on sophomore students' academic performance, increasing potential progression toward a degree. Programs similar to the Model UN may increase the quality of

interaction among students and faculty, strengthen social integration, and positively affect student persistence and retention.

Academic Integration

Though Tinto placed importance on both social and academic integration, Halpin (1990) found that academic integration plays a much larger role, especially for students who commute. Ryan and Glenn (2002–2003) argued although social integration is critical to improve retention, more emphasis should be placed on academic integration. One of their most striking findings was "what our students most needed was support in developing the academic competencies that would allow them to thrive as learners in our classrooms" (Ryan and Glenn 2002–2003, 200). Their research stated that academic integration, development of student skills, and academic confidence positively relate to retention. Programs that concentrate on improving academic skill sets are also likely to increase retention rates.

Measures of academic integration include GPA, the student's assessment of the value of what they are learning, the extent to which they enjoy learning, and the student's perception of their academic performance. Deil-Amen (2011, 87) found multiple measures of academic integration that included: actual or predicted first-year grades; a student's sense of intellectual and academic development; a student's perception of faculty concern; the frequency of social contact or conversations with faculty and advisors about academic and career matters outside the classroom; participation in study groups; time spent on homework; and enrollment in freshman seminars.

Academic integration involves not only meeting academic standards, but identifying and embracing the norms of the academic setting. Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) found that self-efficacy directly influences students' academic expectations and academic performance. Highly efficacious students are more likely to view academic work as a challenge to be overcome than as a threat to them. Programs like the Model UN that increase students' self-efficacy have a high chance of also encouraging those students to remain in school instead of dropping out.

Another method that has been shown to enhance academic integration is active learning. Active learning techniques employ the use of methods that encourage more direct participation such as discussions, debates, and class polling (Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan 2000). In measures of thinking, problem solving, and motivation to learn, students engaged in active learning have performed much better than those in lecture only classes (McKeachie et al. 1987). Braxton et al. assert that active learning is an antecedent of academic integration; like self-efficacy, active learning influences the students' perception of their own academic development and can also increase

performance. We argue that the Model UN program fosters academic integration by including the active learning techniques of simulations, speeches, debates, and negotiations.

Active Learning and Model UN Simulations

The literature exploring active learning and simulations in political science includes single-session simulations (Baranowski 2006); the effectiveness of specific simulations on student learning outcomes (Frederking 2005; Shellman and Turan 2006); and the design of simulations to stimulate student engagement (Damron and Mott 2005; Rivera and Simons 2008). While this literature lacks significant coverage on Model UN simulations specifically, there are a few that study the role of Model UN in the Political Science curriculum.

The seminal study on the Model UN argues that the Model UN serves as a learning laboratory, where students combine practical politics with political concepts and facts and apply these elements in the form of strategies and techniques of international diplomacy (Hazleton and Mahurin 1986). The authors administered large-N surveys to both regional Model UN platforms and the National Model United Nations. They found that the Model UN has a great impact on students' academic integration and academic skills, specifically, by motivating intellectual curiosity, developing cognitive strategies, improving verbal and writing skills, and facilitating a change in attitudes toward the object being simulated. Concerning social integration, the authors argue that the Model UN simulation increases students' self-confidence by having participated in a large group-learning project.

McIntosh (2001) describes the success within class Model UN simulations have on peer mentoring. He notes that when Model UN is used to connect classes, it can encourage students to teach one another, a form of academic integration and arguably, social integration. McIntosh describes several ways Model UN can encourage peer mentoring: students can prepare structured briefings on particular countries to be used by future Model UN students; students with Model UN experience can take on leadership responsibilities in future conferences by serving as committee chairpersons and organizers; and veterans can play the role of policy experts, advising newcomers in the simulation. Ripley, Carter, and Grove (2009) argue that Model UN is the quintessential active learning simulation. The authors note Model UN can facilitate substantive learning and skill development.

Concerning substantive knowledge, Ripley, Carter, and Grove (2009) state that Model UN gives students the chance to research international problems and to see them from multiple, often varying perspectives. Students

gain an appreciation for international organizations and their complexities, as well as the multifaceted aspects of policy formation, negotiation, and policy implementation. The authors also note that Model UN conferences carry over into the classroom, creating more confident, well-informed contributions during class discussions. Concerning academic/practical skill development, Model UN requires substantial preparation that focuses upon and improves research and organizational skills. The authors further note that students benefit from the opportunity to develop public speaking skills, as well as from improved writing skills and the ability to evaluate information sources, convey ideas accurately and concisely, and practice constructive criticism.

Because of the clear impact of Model UN on student success, conferences and participation in Model UN activities have increased dramatically. Although recognizing some gaps between the simulations and practice, Muldoon (1995) argues that educators have found MUN programs to be so successful that participation in these programs and the numbers of programs offered worldwide has grown exponentially. The author details that in 1993 alone, the United Nations Association of the United States of America lists over 170 conferences convened that year, including over 70,000 high school and college students. This success can be attributed to the increase in student skills, academic and social integration that educators experience because of the MUN conference.

Additionally, a glance at the current NMUN report suggests growth has continued. The NMUN now includes over 6,000 college students from six continents who participate in NMUN-associated conferences in New York City; Washington, D.C.; Sangdo, South Korea; and Portland, Oregon. The report also details self-assessed survey results that illustrate the conference's substantial impact on indicators of academic growth. Statistics demonstrate that 91 percent of participants developed skills in negotiation and conflict resolution; 88 percent developed team-building skills; 84 percent stated they saw improvement in personal leadership; 85 percent demonstrated improvement in public speaking; 87 percent saw growth in their research skills; and 81 percent improved their writing (NMUN 2014).

Study Abroad Programs and Retention

Several scholars have found direct links between retention and study abroad programs (Hamir 2011; Metzger 2006; Posey 2003; Young 2003). Metzger (2006, 167) went so far as to call study abroad a "21st century retention strategy." Hamir (2011, 4) concluded students who participated in a study abroad program increased their graduation prospects by 64 percent in five years and 200 percent in six years. Young (2003) found similar results,

noting that students who participated in one study abroad program stayed enrolled a full semester longer, on average, than students who did not. Young (2003) also argued that study abroad increases opportunities for social and academic integration. Younes and Asay (2003) discovered that students benefited from forming and strengthening social relationships with one another. One of the most ambitious efforts to explore achievement of learning outcomes through study abroad is the Georgia Learning Outcomes of Students Studying Abroad Research Initiative (GLOSSARI). The decade-long project found that students who studied abroad in the 35-institution University System of Georgia had higher GPAs after returning and had higher graduation rates than those who did not (Sutton and Rubin 2004). Furthermore, study abroad was beneficial to at-risk students by providing the focus needed to be successful academically.

Study abroad programs can also increase social integration due to students living closely with one another and being able to get to know their peers and faculty members outside the classroom. Further, these programs help with academic integration, as students are shown to be more intellectually developed and curious after studying abroad. Interestingly, little research has been done exploring whether shorter, less expensive domestic trips are capable of fostering similar social and academic integration. We hypothesize that study away programs have many of the attributes of study abroad programs that encourage retention, but do so at a fraction of the cost. Using a descriptive case study method, we explore a Model UN program that includes a study away trip to the NMUN competition in New York City to document the benefits of this type of program in retention efforts.

Case Study: National Model United Nations Study Away Program

The NMUN is sponsored by the National Collegiate Conference Association (NCCA), which has been hosting NMUN conferences for over 40 years. While Model UN conferences are held around the globe, the New York City conference is the premier conference and concludes its final day of simulation at the United Nations headquarters. More than 5,000 delegates, half of whom come from outside the United States, attend the NMUN conference each spring. The stated goal of the NCCA in hosting the NMUN is to bring together the next generation of international leaders in a quality program to discuss current global issues.

The NMUN is a four-day conference designed as an immersive simulation of the international diplomacy required of United Nations delegates. Students attend committee meetings as delegates who represent their school's assigned country. Each delegation includes one or two students for each committee.

Students are also expected to assume the role of their assigned country by arguing for positions appropriate to that country's political culture. Within each committee are a series of formal and informal caucuses. Formal caucusing requires students to abide by the rules of order specific to the NMUN, to vote on committee issues or points of concern, and to give short speeches on the topic of interest or the work being done. Informal caucusing consists of diplomatic negotiation, group work with other delegates, and the writing of draft resolutions and working papers. Students are encouraged to meet with delegates outside committee meetings to complete negotiations and papers. At the end of the conference, NMUN staff awards the best performing delegations as well as individual delegates for position papers and outstanding performance.

While participation in NMUN requires a university affiliation, there are no set requirements for how the delegations are formed or how they prepare for the conference. Many schools offer Model UN as an extracurricular activity. Given our university's struggle with engaging students outside the classroom, we partnered with the study abroad program office to develop the Model UN three-credit-hour course that included the trip to New York City as a study away program. Although the conference lasts only four days, the trip itself is usually an eight-day journey, allowing two days for travel and two free days in New York City. Collaboration with the study abroad program has several advantages, including reduced administrative burdens for the faculty, the ability to offer course credit, and student eligibility for fund-raising and scholarship opportunities to offset the cost of travel. The trip cost individual students around $1,600 (covering airfare, hotel costs, ground transportation, etc.), although tuition for the course and living expenses while in New York City were additional costs. While the cost is not a trivial amount of money to the university's average student, it is still well below the cost of a conventional study abroad trip, and several students were able to fund-raise for the entire cost of the trip.

The participants could enroll in either a lower- or upper-level political science course. The course met each week for three hours. Students were expected to dress in professional attire for each meeting to prepare them for the conference and to promote a group identity. Coursework included reading multiple texts on the United Nations, parliamentary procedure, and the assigned country. Other assignments included writing multiple drafts of position papers, public speaking exercises, and simulations of the conference negotiation process. The students' grades for the course were based on in-class work and preparation, the quality of position papers, and performance at the conference itself.

Methodology

In order to determine whether a Model UN program can have an impact on retention, we explore the extent to which participation in a program helped to develop participants' social and academic integration. We look first at each student's progression toward graduation after enrolling in the program to see whether they persisted and eventually graduated in an appropriate length of time. We also look at cumulative GPAs before and after participation in the program to determine if the students improve overall academically after the course. In addition, this research utilizes three different data sources to explore social and academic integration. First, the students completed open-ended questions in class at the end of the semester that allowed them to express their sentiments about how, if at all, the program affected them pertaining to social and academic integration. In addition, students were given a week after returning from the trip to write a reflective essay outside of class. Students were instructed to imagine they had the opportunity to write a letter to their former, naïve self from the first day of class, describing the ways this class impacted their life. Since academic integration includes the student's assessment of the value of what they are learning as well as their perception of how they are performing academically, we feel these self-reported measures are valid for our research purposes.

The student responses to these questions and reflective essays were content-analyzed independently by three coders for reliability. Through this analysis, we discovered themes in the responses that suggested the experience increased the students' intellectual development as well as social and academic integration. While the parameters of the reflective essay were much more open than the direct questions, the theme of enhanced academic skills permeated those essays. Specifically, themes that emerged were increased skills in writing, speaking, and negotiation as well as increases in self-confidence and personal growth in general. Themes in social integration included bonding with peers and faculty advisors as well as the development of a group identity.

While these sources provide a useful measure of the students' perceptions, we wanted a more objective measure of improvement that would include an assessment of skills prior to the experience as well as an assessment afterward. Therefore, in the second, third, and fourth years of the program, we utilized pretest and posttest skills audits on the first day and last day of class, where students rated themselves in areas that we believe capture elements of social and academic integration. The instrument was a modified version of a skills audit utilized at the University of Sheffield (Sheffield Graduate Development Programme 2012). The audit, which appears in the Appendix, asked students to assess various skills on a five-point scale ranging from no experience to wide experience. While the survey included nine general skills, we focused on

six we felt related to social and academic integration, including ability to think critically, work as a team, problem-solve, communicate effectively, examine personal development, and creatively apply knowledge. The audit included multiple measures/facets for each skill. We aggregated the individual measures to create indices for each specified skill and then did reliability analysis for each index to confirm that the components measured the same basic ability. To determine if individual students improved from pretest to posttest and whether the improvements were significant, we conducted matched pairs difference of means analysis for each aggregated component.

Data Results and Analysis

We are interested in exploring whether our Model UN class that included a trip to the NMUN conference in New York City successfully increased social and academic integration as well as overall intellectual development. We examined the program over the span of four spring semesters in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014. A total of 64 students participated in the course over the four semesters. There were a total of 33 females (52 percent) and 31 males (48 percent), which was a slight oversampling of males compared to our general population of students (65 percent female and 35 percent male). Of the students enrolled, 17 could be classified as underrepresented racial or ethnic minority members. This 27 percent minority rate in our sample is slightly under the 35 percent minority status in our general population. The students ranged in age from 18 to 51, with a mean age of 24.13 and a standard deviation of 5.79. There were 43 political science majors, five English majors, three business majors, three biology majors, two communications majors, and two physics majors. The remaining students either had majors in history, foreign languages, psychology, nursing, or sociology, or were undeclared.

To assess the impact of the study away program on retention, the most obvious measure would be individual student persistence in their education after completing the course. Clearly, it is impossible to determine direct causality in this scenario since we cannot isolate the impact of other contributing factors. However, we assert that the Model UN study away program increased the social and academic integration of the students, which has been shown to positively affect student persistence and retention. Of the 64 students enrolled in Model UN over the four semesters, 10 students (15.6 percent) graduated in the same semester. We readily admit that participation in Model UN had little, if any, impact on these students' progress toward graduation given the timing of enrollment. Of the remaining 54, 50 enrolled again the following semester, which is a 93.6 percent persistence rate. Of the remaining four students, three experienced positive attrition by enrolling the following term in other schools, and the other one appears to be a case of

negative attrition. We continue to track the students over time, and Table 1 contains the status of each student at the end of December 2014 divided by the year they first took the Model UN course.

As can be seen in Table 1, 39 of the 64 students who participated in the program graduated by December 2014, resulting in a 61 percent graduation rate, much higher than the university rate of approximately 20 percent within six years. In addition to calculating the graduation rate, we looked at pace of degree progression. Specifically, we calculated how many hours the students needed to graduate before completing the program and then estimated the number of semesters it would take to graduate if the students enrolled full time each semester. On average, students enroll in the Model UN course with 74 hours completed and 50 more needed to graduate, which should take approximately four semesters. For the 29 students that graduated, but not in the same semester they enrolled in Model UN, four was the mean number of semesters taken to graduate. Therefore, the students participating in the program are not only graduating, but graduating on time.

These raw graduation and persistence numbers suggest that Model UN may have a positive impact on these rates, but our sample size limits our ability to make any sweeping conclusions. Further, measuring gains in academic achievement can be problematic in such programs due to the self-selection of participation (Hadis 2005). In order to partially control for self-selection, we compare the student's individual academic performance before and after participating in the program. For the 50 students who persisted after taking the Model UN course, their mean cumulative GPA prior to enrollment was 3.182. At the end of the following semester, the mean cumulative GPA for that same group of 50 students was 3.197. While the GPAs did increase, a matched-pairs analysis found that the difference was not statistically significant. We do have data on 35 of these students a year after completing the

Table 1: Student Status in December 2014 by Year First Enrolled in Program (n = 64)

	Year First Enrolled (Spring)				
Student Status	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**Total**
Dropped out	1	0	1	0	**2**
Transferred	2	2	1	0	**5**
Persisted	1	2	4	11	**18**
Graduated	14	11	10	4	**39**
Total	18	15	16	15	**64**

program. For these 35 students, the mean cumulative GPA before the program was 3.079, while the mean cumulative GPA a year later is 3.197, a tenth of a point higher. Furthermore, the matched-pairs difference of means test confirmed this positive difference is statistically significant at the .05 level. In other words, on average, students who complete the Model UN program experience a statistically significant increase in their cumulative GPAs within a year of enrolling in the course.

To further isolate the program's effectiveness for our sample, we looked at student perceptions of the program and its influence on their intellectual development and academic performance that demonstrate the degree to which students are integrated academically. A summary of these results appears in Table 2. First, we asked students to explain, if at all, the ways in which their writing skills improved because of Model UN. Fifty-five students (86 percent) stated that their writing skills had improved because of the class. Further, 40 students (63 percent) specifically mentioned that their technical writing skills improved. In the reflective essays, one student said, "You will learn how to be a more concise writer." Another stated, "I would encourage students that are looking for an opportunity to further develop their research skills while feeling uncertain of the outcome to take this class."

We also asked the ways in which their speaking skills had improved because of Model UN. Fifty-six students (88 percent) responded that the program

Table 2: Indicators of Improved Academic Integration According to Students' Own Perceptions (n = 64)

Academic Integration Skill	Evidence/Features of Skill	Number of students seeing improvement	Percentage of students seeing improvement
Writing	General writing	55	86%
Writing	Technical writing	40	63%
Writing	Political writing	10	16%
Writing	Write diplomatically	8	13%
Public speaking	General	56	88%
Public Speaking	Confidence	34	53%
Public Speaking	Speaking concisely	15	23%
Negotiation	General negotiation	49	77%
Negotiation	Group work	15	23%
Negotiation	Consensus building	15	23%
Negotiation	Persuasion	12	19%
Self-confidence/ growth	General	57	89%

did improve their speaking skills. In addition, 34 (53 percent) said they were more confident, less nervous, or no longer scared of public speaking. One student wrote, "You will most importantly, however, gain confidence in your academic and speaking skills."

The literature suggests students who experienced intellectual development and increased motivation were less likely to drop out (Fralick 1993; Friedman and Mandel 2009). We measured this type of development by probing about increased self-confidence and self-growth. Fifty-seven of the students (89 percent) felt that MUN improved their self-confidence overall. Many students felt more confident and less nervous about public speaking due to the numerous opportunities they were given to practice speeches and converse with international students. The essays also included many references to increasing self-confidence and personal growth due to participation in Model UN. Students explicitly mentioned they overcame fears due to their experiences in class and on the trip. One student wrote, "For the first time you will also learn how to write a speech for the allotted time and learn how to deal with your public speaking fears." Another reflected on overcoming lifelong insecurities, writing, "You will acquire a sense of self-confidence in your abilities that you never had before." Students articulated the experience helped them become better-rounded, worldly, and educated individuals.

Students also noted the importance of getting to know their professors outside the classroom, and this type of social and academic integration has been found to greatly increase student persistence (Endo and Harpel 1982). At our university, students do not participate in many activities outside the classroom, so it is more difficult to make student-faculty connections. The study away trip substantially increased the interactions between the students and faculty. As one student writes, "Having a connection [with your professors] will help you with struggles in anything, academic wise at least, and having that is priceless because it gives you a big sense of support from a figure that knows what they are doing."

A sense of social integration a student has with other students is another critical factor that influences a student's decision to remain in college. Developing a sense of integration at a commuter school is an uphill battle. We argue that by taking the students off campus as a group to compete in a conference where they represent the university, we were able to cultivate a sense of integration with their peers, faculty advisors, and the university.

To explore this concept, we asked students to explain the ways they bonded with their classmates during the NMUN conference. A majority of the students indicated that they acquired a sense of camaraderie during the trip through group outings, hotel arrangements, and discussion about the experience. Multiple students noted that the trip was a turning point in feeling

bonded with other classmates and wished that they had felt that way before the trip. The idea that the trip itself was necessary to cultivate cohesion that did not exist prior to the trip was a primary theme. Multiple students indicated things changed once they began the journey of the trip. One student wrote: "you may be very distant from classmates and find some unapproachable, but that will change as soon as you get to NYC. There will be a bond between you and them by the time the trip is halfway done."

While we should not undervalue these students' personal reflections, a more rigorous test of whether the students experienced improvement in skills due to participation in the Model UN program comes from our analysis of the skill set audits. Students enrolled in the program during the spring 2012, spring 2013, and spring 2014 terms completed a skill set audit on the first and last day of class. We had a total of 47 students complete both the pretest and posttest over these three semesters, with students who took the course more than once only doing the audit the first time they enrolled. The summary statistics and reliability measures for each of the nine components audited at both the pretest and posttest appear in Table 3.

To test whether the individual students improved, we ran matched-pairs difference of means tests for each aggregated component. The results appear in Table 4. The first component measured the student's ability to think critically and analytically, both within their area of study and beyond. The survey contained seven questions measuring the ability to compare data, distinguish between types of information, use reason to find solutions, and be proactive in problem solving. We aggregated the responses to create the Ability to Think Critically index, and calculated the means. The mean for the pretest was 24.53, and the mean increased in the posttest to 31.64, which represents a statistically significant 7.11 increase in the index, suggesting the students improved their ability to think critically by participating in the program.

The second component measured the students' teamwork skills. The index, Ability to Work as a Team, contained nine indicators that included abilities such as empowering others, contributing to a team even if others had different ideas**,** recognizing when to compromise, and understanding team roles. The pretest mean was 33.51, while the posttest was 40.49. Students, on average, improved by 6.98 units, and the difference was significant. Participation in the NMUN program improved the students' perception of their team-building skills.

The third index, Problem Solving Abilities, contained seven indicators that assessed a student's ability to use objective approaches, explore multiple solutions, and demonstrate resilience and lateral thinking. On average the index mean for the sample went up pre- to posttest from 24.98 to 31.28, a

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Measures for Self-Assessed Skills Set Indices (n = 47)

Index	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	# of Indicators	Cronbach Alpha Value
Pretest						
Ability to Think Critically	24.53	5.20	13	35	7	.88
Ability to Work as a Team	33.51	5.69	19	45	9	.81
Problem-Solving Abilities	24.98	4.91	15	35	7	.83
Communicating Effectively	21.00	4.42	10	29	6	.79
Examine Personal Development	21.74	4.58	8	30	6	.83
Creatively Apply Knowledge	14.02	3.31	7	20	4	.78
Complete Skills Set	139.79	21.35	75	186	39	.85
Posttest						
Ability to Think Critically	31.64	3.02	25	35	7	.90
Ability to Work as a Team	40.49	4.19	27	45	9	.87
Problem-Solving Abilities	31.28	3.09	25	35	7	.82
Communicating Effectively	27.00	2.74	19	30	6	.82
Examine Personal Development	26.94	3.06	18	30	6	.77
Creatively Apply Knowledge	17.80	2.18	12	20	4	.83
Complete Skills Set	175.13	14.65	133	195	39	.88

Table 4: Paired T-Tests for Self-Assessed Skills Set Indices (n = 47)

Index	Mean	Std. Dev.	Difference	T	Sig (1tail)
Ability to Think Critically			7.11	9.61	.000
Posttest	31.64	3.02			
Pretest	24.53	5.20			
Ability to Work as a Team			6.98	8.50	.000
Posttest	40.49	4.19			
Pretest	33.51	5.69			
Problem-Solving Abilities			6.30	9.49	.000
Posttest	31.28	3.09			
Pretest	24.98	4.91			
Communicating Effectively			6.00	9.52	.000
Posttest	27.00	2.74			
Pretest	21.00	4.42			
Examine Personal Development			5.19	8.61	.000
Posttest	26.94	3.06			
Pretest	21.74	4.58			
Creatively Apply Knowledge			3.77	7.97	.000
Posttest	17.80	2.18			
Pretest	14.02	3.31			
Complete Skills Set			35.34	12.17	.000
Posttest	175.13	14.65			
Pretest	139.79	21.35			

statistically significant improvement of 6.30 units. The fourth index, Communicating Effectively, had six indicators that measured a student's ability to communicate both orally and in writing. Indicators explored the student's ability to check work for errors, give a presentation, and interpret audience feedback during a presentation. The mean on this index went from 21 in the pretest to 27 in the posttest, suggesting on average students saw a 6-point significant improvement in this area as well.

The next component required students to reflect on their own personal development, with six indicators looking at the student's ability to recognize and pursue opportunities for growth and with career paths as a motivating

factor. The mean for the index, Examine Personal Development, went from 21.74 to 26.94, which indicated that students saw a 5.19-point significant improvement in their abilities to review and reflect on their personal and career development after participating in Model UN. The final component, Creatively Apply Knowledge, had four indicators that measured whether students felt they could apply the knowledge learned in school in other settings. The mean for this component went up 3.77 points, from 14.02 to 17.80, at the .001 level of significance. This suggests students had more confidence in their ability to apply academic knowledge outside the classroom after finishing the course.

We aggregated all the components to create a Complete Skills Set index. With a total of 39 components, the minimum value possible is 39 and the maximum is 186. The mean score for the total index in the pretest was 139.79, whereas the mean score for the posttest was 175.13. Thus the cumulative significant difference in skill sets represented a significant 35.34-point increase from the beginning of the term to the end of the semester. We feel this analysis further demonstrates the program's influence on students' academic integration by providing empirical evidence that the students perceived measurable improvement in their skill sets by participating in a Model UN program.

Discussion

In order to further assess the influence a Model UN program has on academic and social integration beyond our limited case study, we also collected data from schools and universities in the University System of Georgia (USG) that participate in the Model UN program in New York City. There are a total of six institutions in addition to ours within the USG that have participated in the Model UN program in New York City over the last three years. We contacted the advisors for the Model UN programs repeatedly, and four out of the six institutions agreed to answer questions about their programs. We asked advisors questions regarding the effect the Model UN program has had on the degree to which their students are academically and socially integrated into their institutions. In addition, we asked how the Model UN program has influenced retention and graduation rates of participating students. Before proceeding to the results from our survey, we will briefly discuss the background information of the institutions that responded to our survey.

The number of years the four USG institutions have participated in Model UN ranges from 4 to 44 with an average of 19.75. All four institutions offer the Model UN program for course credit. In addition, two have Model UN clubs associated with the course. The size of the Model UN delegations ranges from 4 to 20 students, with an average of 13. All four institutions reported that

upon entering the programs, the students in their delegations performed above average academically compared to their general student bodies.

Of the demographic information available, one institution indicated that their delegation's gender demographics were different from those of their school overall, while another indicated that their delegation and school had similar gender compositions. Two schools responded that their delegations' racial and ethnic makeup was similar to that of their institutions. The remaining institutions were not able to accurately assess these demographics.

These schools employed multiple methods to recruit students into their programs. Three institutions used an advisor to recruit students. Three institutions had former Model UN participants recruit students. One institution used their department to recruit students, and one institution did not participate in recruitment activities because students self-selected into their program. One institution provided full funding for the program through school subsidies. School subsidies at the other three schools provided funding for 50 percent, 80 percent, and 90 percent of the costs of participation, while students individually paid the remaining costs.

In order to gauge the potential effect the Model UN program has on academic and social integration, we first asked the participating USG institutions to indicate how Model UN influenced their students' improvement with respect to eight skill areas. In regards to students' ability to think critically, two institutions indicated substantial improvement, and two institutions indicated significant improvement. In regard to the ability to creatively apply knowledge, one institution reported substantial improvement, and three institutions reported significant improvement. All four institutions reported significant improvement regarding their students' ability to work as a team. These findings so far mirror the results from our study in which our students demonstrated statistically significant increases on the Ability to Think Critically, Creatively Apply Knowledge and Ability to Work as a Team indices. In addition, all four institutions indicated significant improvement regarding the ability to negotiate.

With respect to students' ability to communicate effectively in writing, one institution reported substantial improvement, and three institutions reported significant improvement. All four institutions indicated significant improvement regarding their students' ability to communicate effectively orally. These findings are similar to the results from our study in which students had a statistically significant increase of six units on the index Communicating Effectively, including improvements in technical writing, general writing, and public speaking skills. Regarding the ability to reflect upon personal development, one institution indicated substantial improvement, and three institutions indicated significant improvement. Furthermore, one

institution reported substantial improvement in self-confidence, and three institutions reported significant improvement. These findings were again comparable to the improvements seen in our own Examine Personal Development index and self-confidence measure.

Three institutions reported that their students were more connected with one another after completing the Model UN program. Furthermore, three institutions reported that they believed their students felt more connected with their university or became more involved in campus activities after completing the Model UN program. In addition, all four institutions indicated that the Model UN program helped the faculty advisor become more connected with their students. These findings were similar to the information presented by our students in their reflective essays, in which they expressed a closer relationship with their classmates, university and faculty advisors following their Model UN experience.

In regard to Model UN's effect on academic performance, one institution indicated that students' GPAs increased after completing the program. One institution reported no real change in student GPAs after completing the program, and two institutions were unable to assess the Model UN program's effect on GPAs. While we found a statistically significant positive growth in GPAs in our own study, we are unable to assert any similarities among institutions.

We also asked the USG institutions to assess the Model UN program's effect on retention. Three institutions reported that students were more likely to remain enrolled in their institution after completing the Model UN program. One institution reported no real change in enrollment patterns. This finding is somewhat similar, although not identical, to our results where we found 93.6 percent of our students remained enrolled at our school the semester following their Model UN experience. As for the Model UN program's influence on graduation rates, one institution reported that students were more likely to graduate after completing the program. Two institutions indicated no real change in student graduation patterns following program completion. Our own findings showed a 61 percent graduation rate among Model UN students compared with the university rate of approximately 20 percent within six years.

In addition to the survey results presented above, the faculty advisors indicated that the Model UN program had a positive influence on their students and university. One faculty advisor stated, "The Model UN program is highly consistent with the goals of the University, it promotes global awareness, and it provides unique opportunities for high school and college students in our region." Another faculty advisor said, "It's not unique, but one of the major strengths of the program is that it brings together students from a

variety of academic disciplines, regions, and countries who might not otherwise have an opportunity to meet or work together. It introduces students to pressing global issues and forces them to address these issues from a non-American perspective. There are few other programs that challenge parochialism so effectively."

Conclusion

This work has reviewed several ways universities can increase retention and persistence rates including academic performance, academic integration, and social integration. In our study, we found that participation in Model UN class that included a study away trip to the NMUN increased student confidence in their academic performance and in their own perceptions of their writing and speaking capabilities. Furthermore, the experience created a sense of both academic and social integration. This provided students with a sense of belonging: with each other, with faculty and the university and, through investigating international affairs and diplomacy, with the world at large.

We believe that this study illustrates that a program like Model UN can potentially impact retention through increasing academic and social integration. However, the Model UN program at our university is still in its infancy. Our current data includes the first four years of the program, but our sample size is limited to 64 students, and our skill set audit was not performed in the first year, yielding a sample size of 47 for that data set. We readily admit that having such a small sample size limits our ability to generalize and to make broad claims regarding the utility of the program. However, given that the content analysis and the difference of means test provide complementary results, and given that we found statistically significant results in the difference of means test despite the small sample size, we believe the research has merit as a foundational study. Further, the data on progression toward graduation and improvement in grade point averages suggest the program is having a measurable impact on student success in college. Finally, the information from other USG schools participating in Model UN appears to mirror many of our findings, which suggests that the effectiveness of the program is not idiosyncratic to our university.

While we assert that this study provides evidence that a study away program can improve retention of students and should be explored as an option to help students stay in college, the costs of these programs must be taken into account. A key argument in favor of study away trips in retention efforts is that they are less expensive than study abroad trips. However, these more affordable trips may still be cost prohibitive to many students, and

unfortunately, those least likely to be able to afford the trips are also the most likely to benefit from this type of experience. Further, the self-selection of students who enroll in the program limits researchers' ability to evaluate the full impact such programs may have for lower-income or lower-performing students. However, while this may moderate some of our findings, we do not believe it detracts from the ultimate merit of Model UN or similar programs. In many ways, these mitigating factors lend further value to both future research and arguments to redirect resources to make such programs more accessible to all students.

Universities concerned with retention often look to student affairs programs first to solve the problem. We suggest that raising awareness of the importance of academic integration in retention is critical to help direct resources toward successful academic programs like Model UN. We are confident that continuing research in this area will validate the positive effects these types of programs have on persistence rates. We assume that many of our colleagues are directing similar programs at their universities and may be struggling to obtain resources to enhance or grow these programs. We feel that establishing an empirical link between these programs and retention is vital to elevating their importance and attracting resources. Essentially, we suggest leaving the classroom to stay in college.

Appendix

Self-Assessed Skills Audit for Model UN Students
You are asked to self-assess your skills on a five-point scale:

1 = no experience
2 = a little experience
3 = don't know/not sure
4 = some experience
5 = wide experience

The skills list is not exhaustive; it is designed to stimulate you to reflect upon the skills you are practicing, raise self-awareness, and increase your ability to articulate your skills.

1. Think critically and analytically within your subject areas and beyond					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• relate and compare data from different sources, identify issues and obtain relevant information					
• reason and apply decision-making processes and consider how to find solutions to problems					
• identify appropriate data sources					
• review a range of different points of view and select the most appropriate conclusion					
• distinguish between different types of information to inform conclusions					
• capture key information from written or verbal sources					
• identify significant opportunities and be proactive in putting forward ideas for problem solving.					

2. Work as part of a team					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• build and develop working relationships with academic staff, peers and colleagues					
• work effectively with others to complete tasks and achieve results					
• empower others to work together as part of a team or group					
• recognize and understand when compromise and accommodating others is necessary					
• interact well with others and work cooperatively as a team member					
• understand how to gain the attention of others in a team or group when required					
• understand how to contribute effectively and cooperatively with others even if they do not share the same ideas and ways of working					
• express self effectively in a group and in one-to-one situations					
• have an understanding of team roles					

3. Use your problem-solving abilities					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• use an appropriate approach to questioning in order to gain information from which to draw conclusions					
• use an objective approach to relate to others in order to achieve goals					
• make good use of verbal reasoning skills, able to handle complex data and make selective use of information					
• explore more than one solution in order to solve a problem					
• consider the ideas of others to help solve problems					
• manage the process of problem solving over a period of time					
• demonstrate resilience and lateral thinking abilities when applied to problem solving					

4. Apply your communication skills, both orally and written					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• understand the differences in presenting types of documents, e.g. reports, essays, summaries					
• check written work for errors before submission					
• express and convey ideas appropriately and accurately in writing					
• successfully give a presentation or demonstration					
• demonstrate that information being received is understood by using a range of verbal and nonverbal signals					
• understand when people have taken account of your views and you of theirs					

5. Reflect upon and review your own personal and career development					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• recognize and develop skills and competencies required for learning and future employment					
• develop opportunities for learning activities through current and future roles					
• recognize the importance and value of activities outside the curriculum, e.g., work experience, sports, clubs					
• identify when extra support and help may be useful					
• maintain positive attitudes to work and understand when a task has not been completed well and identify changes for the future					
• understand how to gain feedback on work or performance					

You are asked to self-assess your skills on a five point scale:

1 = no experience
2 = a little experience
3 = don't know/not sure
4 = some experience
5 = wide experience

6. Work autonomously and set your own goals					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• aspire to and maintain a results-driven approach where appropriate					
• focus on results and performance indicators and use different strategies to achieve targets					
• apply suitable approaches and put in extra effort if required in order to meet tight deadlines					
• work without close supervision and use own initiative					
• identify resources required to complete a set task					
• harness motivation and hard work to assist in the completion of work objectives					

7. Plan, monitor and evaluate in order to influence change					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• make use of effective planning and preparation in order to anticipate and overcome problems					
• maintain effectiveness in changing environments					
• make appropriate adjustments when undertaking tasks					
• set own goals and review these systematically					
• adjust to meet different work styles					
• work alongside colleagues in different environments					

8. Develop time management and organizational skills					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• establish a course of action for self and others to achieve goals					
• plan and prepare effectively for assignments, including use of appropriate resources					
• plan day in order to manage time more effectively					
• prioritize own and others' work					
• meet set deadlines and understand the process required to meet project outcomes					
• keep track of work schedules and deadlines by applying multitasking abilities					

9. Creatively apply your academic knowledge in work- and non-work-related settings					
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
• generate and recognize best practice and apply imaginative ideas to different situations					
• work out a preferred course of action					
• think laterally and encourage others to do so and consider how they approach an unconventional task					
• present complex and unusual ideas to friends and colleagues					

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