WHY SOME FAIL AND OTHERS SUCCEED? EXPLAINING THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF PA UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The current study explores multiple factors (such as: class attendance, previous academic performance, in-class involvement and attention, class absenteeism, schedule, gender and other control variables) which can influence the academic performance of public administration undergraduate students. The regression model developed based on the academic literature was tested on a sample of 1st year students (N = 115) enrolled in the Public Administration bachelor program of Babeș-Bolyai University (Cluj-Napoca) in order to explain their performance (grade) in a final examination. Since none of the variables included in the model are self-reported (i.e. classic self-administered questionnaires) we have eliminated the possibility for any type of social desirability bias to influence our results, thus strengthening the reliability and robustness of our findings.

Our results show that the main factors which can influence students’ academic performance are attendance to seminars and in-class involvement. All other factors which were included in the regression model (age, gender, distance between class site and their home, residence in urban or rural environment, attention and motivation, class schedule and four proxies/measures for previous performance) were not statistically significant in any of the models or showed an inconsistent/unstable influence on academic performance.

Starting from the aforementioned and other findings from the literature, we also propose and discuss specific measures which can be adopted by faculty level decision makers in order to help students improve their academic performance and ensure better educational outcomes, especially in regard to the admission criteria currently in place.

Points for practitioners

The research investigates, among other potential factors, whether class attendance influences performance regardless of other individual characteristics. In doing so, the research tries to provide an answer to the ongoing debate on the usefulness of compulsory attendance to lectures and seminars in higher education. Moreover, by observing the influence of previous performance (during high school) on current academic performance, the research can identify more adequate admission criteria which can be used by university decision makers to ensure a better selection of candidates, thus potentially decreasing dropout rates.

Keywords: academic performance, undergraduate students, grades, regression analysis, PA studies, Romania.

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