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An Examination of the Applicability of Tinto’s Model of Student Persistence at a Christian Liberal Arts College

by Rick Zomer

It is estimated that the number of students who will begin a course of study but fail to complete a post secondary degree is between 28.5% (Tinto, 1993) and 50% (Brawer, 1990). This qualitative study reviewed sixteen “at risk” students enrolled at a private Christian college who had successfully persisted into their senior year. Tinto’s Theory of Departure was used as lens to examine the role of individual intentions and commitments and the impact of social and educational congruence on student persistence.

The most significant findings regarding study participants focused on the impact peers and faculty had in the following areas: educational development, social transitions, and faith development. In each of these cases, variations of mentoring relationships were reported by at risk students. This study concluded Tinto’s model was applicable to the experience of at risk students at a private Christian college in that participants developed commitments and intentions while interacting with the social and educational systems of the institution.

Background

Since the early 1970’s, the issue of retention has received a great deal of attention from both college and university administrators and students. Partial rationale for this concern can be found in studies which estimate the departure rate for students who begin a course of study but fail to complete their degree to be between 28.5% (Tinto, 1993) and 50% (Brawer, 1996). While these figures are primarily drawn from public institutions, retention statistics for students enrolling at a private college or university are still of concern with the numbers ranging between 8% (Tinto, 1993) and 17% (Walter, 2005). High departure rates can negatively effect the institution in regard to the impact on budget, enrollment, and public perception (Braxton, 2001). It can also affect the individual student in terms of attitudes concerning long-term intellectual growth (Ferguson, 1990) and the student’s ability to be exposed to important socializing agents such as peers, which are readily available on-campus (Perez, 1998).

In this climate, it should not be surprising that numerous theories have been proposed that seek to understand and respond to the issue of retention. Theorists have examined the impact student performance (Spady, 1970), involvement (Astin, 1975), and environment (Bean, 1980) can have on student departure decisions. While each of these studies have been cited in further examinations of the student retention issue (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Metz, 2004), Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory has been often viewed as the groundbreaking work concerning the student retention issue (Metz, 2004).
Tinto’s Model of Student Persistence

Tinto (1975) grounded his writings in Durkeim’s theory on suicide (1953) and Van Gennep’s work on cultural rites of passage (1960). Tinto’s incorporation of these concepts into the discussion of student departure led to the development of a two-dimensional longitudinal model (Tinto, 1975). He proposed that each individual came to campus with “pre-entry attributes” such as prior schooling, skills and abilities, and family background along with a combination of intentions, goals and commitments. Tinto defined student intentions by referencing the student’s choice of major or intended career path and believed that commitments were demonstrated through religious, political, or social leanings. More specifically, it was the interaction of the individual student’s unique attributes, intentions, goals, and commitments with the educational and social systems of the institution that led to a departure from or persistence at their institution.

Tinto posited that a departure decision was a longitudinal process and that a student who experienced isolation, adjustment issues, difficulty, or incongruence with the institution was more likely to depart than a student who did not. According to Tinto, these factors could be evidenced by students who fail to make connections with the campus culture, struggle to appropriately disengage from pre-existing relationships, experience educational difficulties, or discover they hold significantly different personal, political, or religious beliefs than those of the institution. Students who struggle in any of these four areas are more likely to persist, according to Tinto, if they have adequately assimilated their personal intentions and commitments with those they believe to be exhibited by the institution through the social and educational systems on campus.

Challenges to Tinto’s Model

Tinto’s theory was the result of significant research done with national data on institutional retention and has been considered by some to be the most commonly accepted theory of student departure (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000).

While some have claimed Tinto’s model has reached near “paradigmatic status” within the study of college student departure (Berger & Braxton, 1998), his research has also been criticized by others. Theorists such as Tierney (1992) and Tucker (1999) have critiqued Tinto’s work for inappropriately applying the values of dominant student cultures to minorities or for trying to make generalizations that are too broad for his data source.

A major critique of Tinto’s theory can be found in the writings of Tierney (1992). He challenged Tinto’s work in several areas including the sources he used, the impact they have on the claims of his theory, and his misapplication of Van Gennep’s (1960) anthropological writings. Tierney points out that Tinto’s theory is primarily based on data drawn from a specific institutional type: the four year, public institution and, as a result, Tinto’s work should only be applied to students attending that type of institution. He charges that Tinto’s data source is too broad to be able to appropriately apply his theory to other types of educational settings such as historically black institutions, women’s colleges, and small or private colleges or universities (Tierney 1992).
Tucker (1999) extended Tierney’s (1992) critique of Tinto’s theory by claiming the aggregate survey data he used was too broad to make inferences about an individual’s departure decision. Tucker stated there was significant variability from one individual to another in terms of what went into a decision to remain or depart from an institution, so it was inappropriate to make specific claims from such a broad data source (Tucker, 1999). He called for a qualitative rather than survey-based examination of Tinto’s theory so an individual’s circumstances and input could be included in a review of the model.

In addition to Tierney and Tucker’s critiques, Tinto’s work has also been called into question by Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997). They reviewed his model and identified thirteen primary propositions of Tinto’s theory. They applied his work within the context of specific institutions, and found that only five of his concepts had internal consistency. Their work furthered Tierney’s (1992) critique by stating that Tinto’s model had limited applicability to settings other than large, public, four year, institutions. While the authors did not call for Tinto’s theory to be abandoned, they did state his model should be tested in other institutional settings before it could be applied to those environments.

Examinations of Tinto’s Model at Private, Christian Colleges

While Tinto’s work is considered by some researchers to be the most commonly accepted theory of student departure (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000), little work has been done to explore the applicability of his model within the context of highly selective, private institutions (Berger, 1997; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). Even less is known about the applicability of Tinto’s model within the context of a private, Christian college, as a recent review of relevant research resulted in discovery of only three studies set within this context.

An early examination of Tinto’s theory within the setting of a private institution was conducted by Cash and Bissel (1985). They sought to examine his model within the context of two small, church-related institutions, each with a student population of less than 2,000 students. The primary goal of the researchers was to examine Tinto’s theory, specifically the portion dealing with individual commitment. Cash and Bissel speculated that this portion of Tinto’s model might have greater significance within the context of church-related institutions since students who attended these types of colleges often pay significantly more money in tuition and fees than do students attending larger, public universities.

The researchers used a quantitative methodology with surveys given to students as part of the orientation program during their first week on campus. Cash and Bissel included variables such as family background, academic aspirations, expectations related to involvement with co-curricular activities, and interaction with faculty (Cash & Bissel, 1985). The researchers administered a second survey in the spring semester and matched responses to determine which students enrolled for a second semester, giving them an actual rate of persistence. Based on their data analysis, Cash and Bissel determined that the portion of Tinto’s theory dealing with individual commitment was applicable to the church-related institution but that other factors may also influence departure. They called for further study within this environment.
An additional exploration of Tinto’s model of departure is offered by Smith (2002) who set his study within the context of four private, Christian, liberal arts institutions. While Smith’s examination was conducted in the same environment as Cash and Bissel’s (1985), Smith (2002) extended the examination of the impact of Tinto’s theory on retention in this setting by including data collected from students beyond the third semester of enrollment. Smith believed there was limited research on the impact of Tinto’s model in church-related institutions, so he examined the impact social and academic integration had on student departure.

Smith (2002) implemented a quantitative approach to examine Tinto’s model. The results of the study indicated a statistically significant relationship between social and academic integration and persistence at the church-related institution but acknowledged two significant limitations: students were not given operational definitions for either social or academic integration so each participant defined the terms in her or his own manner. In addition, a disproportionate number of females completed the survey. Both of these factors limit Smith’s findings and result in the need for further research to be conducted within the context of the church-related institution.

A further attempt to study Tinto’s departure model within the context of church-related institutions was conducted by Fulcomer (2003). He examined a majority of the student background characteristics included in Tinto’s theory to determine the impact these variables had on retention at a private, church-related, liberal arts institution located in a mid-western state. Fulcomer referenced several factors such as high school grade point average (GPA), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT) scores, contact with faculty, co-curricular involvement, career aspirations, and financial concerns in the thirteen research questions he developed to examine Tinto’s model of departure.

Fulcomer used existing data from instruments that were administered at two specific points in time during the academic year. Information was used from the College Student Inventory (CSI) and The Freshmen Survey that were administered during the first week of the fall semester. The responses from these two instruments were compared to the data generated from the administration of Your First College Year, a survey created by the Higher Education Research Institution (Fulcomer, 2003). The researcher found a statistically significant relationship between ten variables and student retention, so Fulcomer concluded that Tinto’s model of departure partially applied to his study participants (2003).

The findings of Fulcomer’s study however, were limited due to its reliance on data from the Your First College Year, a survey instrument that was still in a pilot phase when it was used by the researcher. In addition, students who left the institution before the middle portion of the spring semester did not take all three surveys so information from these students was not included in the results.

A longitudinal study of Tinto’s Model of Departure at a private, Christian College

This study focused on sixteen individual students who were concurrently enrolled at Calvin College, in their eighth semester (senior year), and who were considered to be at risk of discontinuation based on specific variables identified during their first semester.
The researcher worked with Calvin’s Center for Social Research, the Institutional Review Board, and the Office of the Registrar to gather data for the study. The researcher collected the results from the administration of the College Student Inventory (CSI) given to first year students during the first week of the 2002 fall semester. The high school GPA, SAT, or ACT scores were then retrieved for students who were identified by the CSI as being at risk of discontinuing. For the purpose of this study, students were considered at risk of discontinuing if they had a high drop out proneness score on the CSI (6 or higher on the 9-point scale) and possessed one of the following attributes: an SAT composite below 840, an ACT composite below 20, or a high school GPA below 2.5. Research has shown that the students who do poorly on the SAT or ACT are more likely to discontinue from their institution and that high school GPA is a consistent predictor of student persistence or withdrawal (Feldman, 1993). As a result, it was deemed appropriate to combine these factors with the results of the CSI to obtain a pool of at risk students for this study.

Once the list of highest risk students was generated from institutional data, it was cross-referenced with student enrollment records to determine which students were still enrolled at Calvin during the spring 2006 semester. The researcher used contact information contained on the college’s web page to contact students identified as potential participants and invited them to participate in the study. An email was sent to each student including an explanation of the goals of the study and an invitation to participate in a personal interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interested students were asked to respond to the researcher via email and schedule a time for an interview. In an attempt to maximize the breadth of the data from the individual interviews, students who had indicated a desire to participate in the study were sent a follow up email. It included three questions that the researcher requested each student reflect upon prior to their interview in order to prepare for the study. Participants were asked to examine how their personal intentions and commitments might have been shaped during their college experience and their responses were reviewed by the researcher during the interview. The goal was to provide participants with an additional opportunity for reflection outside of the interview process and gave the researcher the ability to expand on these issues during time spent with the student.

Study participants signed a consent form allowing for the interviews to be taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcription process was handled by a third party hired by the researcher in an attempt to ensure accuracy and limit potential bias. The researcher and the student both had the opportunity to review the written record at a later date to ensure accuracy and to allow for any follow up questions or comments by either the researcher or the participant.

Analysis and Results

Upon completion of the interviews, data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach in an attempt to understand each student’s experience (Creswell, 1998). The goal within this quantitative approach was to uncover the essence or meaning an individual attributed to her or his experience in a systematic or logical manner (Moustakas, 1994) using themes or clusters of data. This information was then used
to determine if the experience of the study participants was consistent with the suppositions presented in Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure. More specifically, the researcher wanted to determine if the study participants’ individual attributes, intentions, goals, and commitments interacted with the institution’s social and educational systems, which in turn, allowed them to persist despite having characteristics of a student identified as at risk.

Analysis of the data identified two dominant categories that participants viewed as significant in their ability to persist: the influence of peers and the impact of college faculty. Fifteen participants specifically mentioned the impact of peers within various components of the educational experience. Likewise, thirteen of the sixteen respondents mentioned a faculty member directly, with the remaining three individuals commenting indirectly about faculty impact. These two dominant categories contained five major themes and several sub-themes. The peer influence category consisted of educational, social, and spiritual components, while the faculty impact category included faith development and transitional issues both inside and out of the classroom.

The impact of peers on study participants’ educational experiences was expressed in three specific areas, the first dealing with the impact peers had on the study participants’ ability to persist. Twelve of the students indicated that they had considered leaving the institution at some point for reasons such as finances, academic difficulty, homesickness, or a lack of feeling connected to the institution. Nine of these students listed peers as the primary reason for their decision to remain enrolled despite the challenges they faced.

Study participants also reported that peers played a significant role in their selection of a major and their ability to make the educational transition from high school to college level work. Thirteen of the students reported that they came to college without a major or changed it at some point during their first seven semesters on campus. While some of these individuals mentioned the impact faculty had in this decision, peers were identified as the dominant group that helped students select their field of study. They were also listed as being the most significant influence in the participant’s educational transition to college. Students reported observing the work ethic, study habits, and time management skills of their peers and used their example to aid them in their educational transition.

In addition to crediting peers with assisting them in their educational transition, study participants also reported that faculty members played a significant role in this process. Student themes in this area clustered around issues such as selection of a major, the process of learning about the values, beliefs, and norms of the institution, and the transition to college level academics. Thirteen of the study participants indicated that a faculty member had played a significant role in one of these areas of their college experience. A second faculty-focused theme from the research involved the process of faith development within the lives of the study participants. Sub-themes within this area included the impact professors had through discussing faith issues inside or outside of the classroom, the opportunity to be involved in mentoring relationships with faculty, and their willingness to help students with personal challenges or issues.
Discussion

While none of the dominant themes in this study match the specific terminology used by Tinto (1975), it is interesting to note the connections between his language and the themes and sub-themes of this research. Tinto suggested persistence could be positively impacted by a successful interaction between a student’s intentions and commitments and the educational and social systems of the institution. Both the student and institutional aspects of Tinto’s model are evident in the responses from the study participants. The results of this study lead to a discussion concerning the appropriateness of using Tinto’s theory as a lens to describe the experiences of these students.

Themes dealing with educational, social, and spiritual development can be viewed as part of the process through which participants determined their intentions and commitments during their college experience. For example, the number of participants who identified or changed their major can be viewed as students progressing through the process of determining their educational intentions. Likewise, the emphasis placed on spiritual growth during college is evidence of students developing their individual commitments. According to Tinto, positive progress in both of these areas leads to student persistence (Tinto, 1993).

In addition to the concept of student intentions and commitments, there are several examples from this study demonstrating the development of social and educational congruence and the impact it had on the participants. Of the sixteen students in the study, nine discussed the process of making the social transition to college, a finding which can be tied to the concept of social congruence. Tinto theorized that an individual’s social congruence was evidenced through interaction with the student culture on campus and through informal interactions with peers (Tinto, 1993). The individuals who discussed social transition issues in this study exclusively mentioned peers as the primary influence in this process, a finding which is consistent with Tinto’s model.

While peers were the only group referenced in terms of social congruence, there was a split between the impact of peers and faculty on participant experience with educational congruence. Of the eleven participants who discussed their academic transition to college, six named fellow students as having the largest influence on their educational experience with another five individuals referring to faculty as having the largest impact.

Limitations

Despite attempts by the researcher to make reasonable efforts to anticipate potential issues in the process of conducting this study, there were still limitations present in this project. The first relates to the number of students who were eligible to take part in this study. Participants had to register a high drop out proneness score on the CSI (a score of 6 or higher on the 9-point scale), an SAT composite below 840 or ACT composite below 20, and a high school GPA below 2.5 in order to be considered at risk. Using these criteria, only 26 potential students were eligible to participate in the study; a figure that accounts for only 2.4% of the 1,049 students who first enrolled at the institution in the fall of 2002. Additionally, of the sixteen students involved in the study, 25% were non-U.S. citizens which can be viewed as a disproportionate number since the incoming
class in the fall of 2002 had a 6.7% international student population (Calvin, 2005). Likewise, 68% of the study participants were women, which is 12% higher than the overall number of female students enrolled at the institution for the fall 2002 semester. These figures underscore potential limitations derived from the composition of the study sample.

A second limitation comes from the use of the term “at risk student” and the degree to which its inclusion in the research questions impacted the subject’s perceptions of the study. The CSI was one of the primary instruments used to identify students as at risk for this study but many of the participants did not initially recall taking the survey during the fall of 2002. As a result, some of the participants were unaware that they could be considered at risk and one of the individuals commented that the use of the term carried a negative connotation that did not characterize her college experience.

Implications for Practice at Private, Christian, Liberal Arts Colleges

The individual experiences of the study participants demonstrate that the components of Tinto’s model are present within the experiences of at risk students attending small, private, Christian, liberal arts, colleges. Student intentions and commitments were found to interact with the institution’s social and educational systems which impacted persistence. While confirming Tinto’s model, these findings also provide insight into institutional practices in regards to at risk students.

This study illustrated the positive impact peers and faculty can have on at risk students. In addition to emphasizing the impact peers have in areas such as a student’s selection of major and academic motivation, this study also demonstrated that a significant amount of faculty impact was felt from experiences outside of the classroom. These findings should cause institutions to think about innovative ways to get peers intentionally involved with at risk students, and to be further encouraged to seek to find ways to increase faculty interaction with at risk students outside of the classroom.

The role of “traditional” support staff that is often offered to at risk students, such as career or personal counseling and other Student Life Staff could also be examined in light of the findings of this study. Few participants mentioned being impacted by these individuals despite the fact that they have often been looked to by private, Christian, liberal arts institutions as a key resource for at risk students. As a result, these colleges may need to look for innovative ways to get career and individual counselors and other Student Life professionals to more intentionally interface with at risk students.

Finally, the strong theme of peers and their impact on at risk students could be used to rethink how specific Student Life policies are conceived. Decisions such as housing assignments could be reviewed to determine if there are more appropriate ways to serve at risk students. It may be appropriate to intentionally assign at risk students a roommate who experienced a high level of academic achievement in high school in an attempt to provide the type of support and motivation mentioned by participants in this study. The size of many private, Christian, liberal arts institutions allows for this type of care to be taken in the housing selection process. However, this may involve institutions increasing the data they include in housing assignments or expanding the information they require on housing applications. It may also require the Housing Office to work
collaboratively with the Admissions Staff and the Registrar’s Office to ensure at risk students are identified early and their academic information is used appropriately in the roommate selection process.

A final recommendation for improving peer contact with at risk students at private, Christian, liberal arts institutions would be to look for ways to be more intentional with the efforts of Resident Assistants and other Para-professional staff. These individuals are hired to build community within the residence halls and are selected, in part, due to the interpersonal skills they possess. Resident Assistants could be trained to serve as peer mentors and be assigned an at risk student to meet with during the student’s first semester or year on campus. Funding for the Resident Assistant position already exists so there would be minimal additional cost to the institution and involvement with peer mentoring could be made a condition of admission for at risk students. Such an arrangement would provide a context for peer contact in areas such as educational transitions, persistence decisions, major selection, and social transitions.

References


