

Feature Article

Reflections: Rethinking Engagement and Student Persistence

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Introduction from Editor-in-Chief Professor Karen Nelson

We are delighted to feature this timely reflective article on Rethinking Engagement and Student Persistence by **Professor Vincent Tinto, Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University, United States of America (USA)**. It's timely because six years ago Professor Tinto reflected in this Journal on Student Persistence – and that was pre-COVID, and the associated mass transition to online, flexible and hybrid learning modalities. We are delighted because during the STARS 2023 Conference, it was apparent that Professor Tinto's work continues to inspire and guide practice as he generously offers his thoughts to practitioners and researchers who share his passion for improving student outcomes. In this article, Vincent explores the role that social networks have in fostering student engagement, leading to persistence. As he puts it 'engagement matters' and indeed it does, although its impact as he says remains relatively under-explored. Vincent considers social networks using the classroom and curriculum as contexts for understanding how different forms of networks: tight or loose, dense or sparse can engender different outcomes for students noting that the mere existence of a network will not always lead to positive student engagement. He gives attention to the formation of networks and notes that some of these connecting relationships are less visible, especially for online students and for those students whose networks exist in virtual social spaces that are outside the realm of our institutions. Acknowledging that staff cannot and should not seek to be involved in all student networks, he implores us to do what we can to foster productive networks within our spheres of influence, because put simply 'student engagement cannot be left to chance.'

Keywords: Student engagement; retention; persistence; student networks.

Discussions of promoting student success in higher education invariably cite the importance of student engagement. That they do so is not surprising. Study after study have shown that students who are more engaged are, on average, more likely to succeed. The key term is "on average." Not all students who engage succeed. Nor do all students who do not engage fail. This is the case because engagement is more complex and varied than typically recognized. Its impact on persistence depends, in part, on students' perceptions of their engagements and the meaning they take from them, in particular about their ability to meet the academic demands of the university, typically referred to as academic self-efficacy, and their belonging in an institution that values their presence, in other words their sense of belonging.¹ Not all engagements are seen by students as positive. When that is the case, they can undermine persistence. Conversely, when engagements are seen as positive, they can

¹ This is akin to Reschly and Christenson (2012) and Ben-Eliyahu et al. (2018) argument that affective engagement, that is students' emotional response to their engagements, can affect students' subsequent academic, social and cognitive engagement and, in turn, their persistence.



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promote persistence. These matter because each influences student motivation to persist and, in turn, persistence (Tinto, 2015; 2022).

But while engagement matters, it proves to be the case that with whom the student engages may matter as much if not more. A recent study of second year retention by Eckles and Stradley (2011), for instance, found that the retention of a student's friend had as great an effect on that student's retention that any background variable. If a student's friend leaves, the student is more likely to leave. Conversely, if a student's friend stays, the student is more likely to stay.²

This finding reflects another aspect of engagement that has been not yet been fully explored, namely how patterns of student engagement with other students impacts persistence. Answering this question calls for the use of social network analysis that is based on the simple premise that peoples' social and academic behaviors are shaped by social ties with other people whose behavior influences their own and vice versa (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).³ As regards other students, these social ties define the space in which student interactions with other students occurs and influence, indifferent ways, individual behavior of members of the network (Smith & Tinto, 2022). When a student's network consists of friends who are of high academic standing, the student is more likely to be of high academic standing (Carrell et al., 2009). The converse is also true. When a student's network consists of students who are doing poorly, it is likely that student will also do poorly.

To what degree that this is the case depends on both the density of the network, whether it is tightly or loosely knit, and the person's location in the network, whether they are at the center or periphery of the network. The denser or more tightly knit a network is, the greater the number of possible interactions among its members. The more central individuals are to the center of a network, the more interactions they have with other members of the network. Issues of density and location matter because students who are at or near the center of dense networks of affiliation with other students are more likely to be affected by the behaviors of other students in the network. It is generally the case that having more connections leads to more social support (Eggens et al., 2008), a greater sense of belonging (Dawson, 2008), and possibly greater academic performance and persistence. Much depends, however, on the behaviors and performance of other members of the network. When students in the network succeed, a student in the dense network is also more likely to succeed, especially when they are located at or near the center of the network (Rizzuto et al., 2009; Thomas, 2000). The converse is also true. When students in a dense network are doing poorly, a student located at or near the center of the network is also more likely to do poorly. These, and other studies (e.g., Eggens et al., 2008; Smith, 2015) lend support to the importance not only of students' network of affiliations in understanding student performance and persistence, but also the importance of how affiliations with specific individuals play in persistence.⁴

Some, if not many, students participate in multiple or what are called compartmental networks each of which can have different impacts on student behavior. For example, MaCabe (2016) found that some students participate in one or more networks for academic support and in different networks for social support. In such compartmental networks, it is often the case that students in one network may not have friends in the other network. It is also the case that some students do not participate in either tightly knit or compartmentalized networks. Their engagements are scattered among different students who themselves are only loosely connected to other networks. As a result, they are less likely to be affected by other students in the network. Though such students may do well academically, they are more likely to report themselves as lonely and dropout (MaCabe, 2016; Stadfeld et al., 2019).

The effects of students' networks are also influenced by the nature of the institution in which engagement occurs. They are likely to be greater in residential campuses where students frequently encounter each other in a variety of settings. In non-residential settings, especially for those who work and/or have family responsibilities, the effects of campus networks may be mediated by the other networks students have beyond the campus. Some may enhance success, others may not.⁵ But how they do so depend, in part, on the value laden environment of the institution and the society that values some forms of engagement more than others.⁶

² This applies as well to the impact of students' engagements with specific faculty and staff.

³ For a discussion of the use of network analysis in the study of college communities and classrooms see Grunspan et al. (2014) and Smith and Vohnhoff (2109).

⁴ The use of mentor programs, especially but not only for underrepresented students, is but one concrete example how a student's affiliation with a particular individual within a network of affiliations can enhance the likelihood of student persistence (e.g., Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; and Ma, 2010).

⁵ The experience of commuting students who live at home suggests that the way it does depends on a number of factors not the least of which reflect the cultural norms of their family (Pokorny et al., 2017). For some students, family support may be essential for student success (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). In other cases, it may hinder it as may be the case for female students who have family responsibilities.

⁶ For a study of network behavior in different countries, see Hwang et al., (2004).

On campuses that are diverse, such as those characterized by racial, ethnic, immigrant status, and gender orientation diversity, attribute-based networks can also evolve in ways that promote persistence.

Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016), for instance, found that African American Student Network participants had more connections overall and higher percentages of same race than their counterparts not in the network. More importantly, students in such networks showed greater persistence (Bourke & Bray, 2019).

Institutional Crossroads

Classrooms as Crossroads

Institutions are marked by a variety of crossroads where students encounter other students. Two that are most directly related to student learning and persistence are the classrooms that dot the educational landscape of the institution and the courses in a field of study that contains the classrooms students take to earn their degrees.

Classrooms are the one place on campus where most students encounter each other and engage in formal educational activities. As such, classrooms serve as nodes in campus networks that connect students to other students on campus. The educational encounters that occur in the classroom lead, not only to micro-networks within class, but also to student networks beyond class.⁷ To the extent that occurs depends on the structure of the learning activities in classroom. Pedagogies such as cooperative learning and problem or project-based learning require students to engage with other students in the class in work groups. Doing so enhances the likelihood that students in class will engage with some of those students outside class. The use of lectures does not.

With whom students work also depends on the choices faculty make about which students should participate in those groups. Left on their own, students will typically select their friends or other students they know to work in a group. Often this results in classroom level stratification among students of different gender, race, income, and immigrant background, that mirrors stratification outside the classroom and the campus. Faculty can interrupt such stratification by intentionally organizing the classroom so that students have to work together with students they would not otherwise engage. In institutions that are diverse in student attributes such as race, ethnicity, and income backgrounds, the impact of such pedagogical practices within diverse classrooms can promote inclusive cooperative engagement among students that may have non-trivial impacts on inclusive affiliations beyond the classroom. More importantly, it may have powerful impacts on what students learn in the classroom.

As a case in point, I interviewed a student who participated in a socially and racially diverse classroom that employed cooperative group activities in a problem-based format (Tinto, 2019). Students had to work together to solve a problem. When asked about his experiences in such a classroom the student said:

I think more people should be educated in this form of education. I mean because it's good. We learn not only how to interact with ourselves, but with other people of different races, different sizes, different colors, different everything. I mean it just makes it better. Not only do you learn more, you learn better.

When asked what he meant by “learn better” he replied, “I was able to hear and learn from the voices of students whose voices I would not otherwise hear.”

The impact of these sorts of experiences can have ripple effects that spread throughout the campus, if not beyond, that can reshape patterns of campus engagements. For students who experience such classrooms, they can alter the trajectory of their learning in ways that might not otherwise occur.⁸

⁷ For commuting students, especially those who work and/or have family responsibilities, the classroom may be the only place on campus where they can engage with other students. If they do not engage there, other opportunities to engage elsewhere are few. Though isolation from the life of the institution does not in itself lead commuting students to leave the university, it weakens their connection to the university and makes them more susceptible to forces beyond the campus. The experience of commuting students who live at home suggests that the way it does depends on a number of factors not the least of which reflect the cultural norms of their family (Pokorny et al., 2017).

⁸ Social networks have been studied in classrooms in learning communities (Grunspan et al., 2014) and in massive open online courses and e-learning (Cela et al., 2014; Veletsianos et al., 2015).

Courses as Crossroads

Courses are not randomly distributed in the university. They exist within a curriculum structure that determines the courses students have to take in a degree program. Students are connected to other students through these courses (Uriah et al., 2020). For many students, courses within a major are places on campus where lasting academic and, sometimes, social networks begin. The connections formed within majors can form tightly knit networks that shape the character of a student's academic and social support and subsequent success (Bianciani & McFarland, 2013).⁹ For some students who participate in two if not more, networks, their major may provide academic support, but not substantial social support. Such support is typically provided by another network (e.g., students in athletic programs or student organizations).

This is true for most, but not all courses in a major. This is the case because most majors require entry level or gateway courses in fields such as Statistics, Psychology, History, and Sociology. These are typically large courses in the first year that involve students from different majors. To the degree that they do, entry level courses can serve as nodes connecting networks of students in one major with students in networks in other majors.¹⁰ At the same time, entry level courses provide opportunities for interdisciplinary conversations among students that might otherwise not occur. For that to occur, however, faculty teaching those courses have to organize the classroom in ways that enhance the likelihood of such conversations. As with classroom groups, left on their own students will often sit next to another student in their field of study.¹¹

The Formation of Networks over Time

Most students enter universities with few, if any, prior connections. Over time, they meet other students and networks begin to form. At first they are erratic. Over the course of the first year, they begin to stabilize as students encounter more students (Bruun & Bearden, 2014). For students in fraternities, sororities, and athletic teams, these quickly become tightly knit networks that provide students social and sometimes academic support. Some of these networks are based on attributes, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and immigrant status, that provide students social support that might otherwise be difficult to find. For other students, their networks may shift from loosely connected networks during the first year, to more tightly knit academic and social networks that follow from their field of study (Stadfeld et al., 2019). For still other students, their encounters in subsequent years lead them to participate in two or more networks (i.e., compartmental networks), one which offers academic support, the other social support. In some, if not many cases, a student's connection with a friend in a network, regardless of its location, may lead over time to becoming a member of another network in which the friend is also connected. In this fashion, the number of networks in which students participate will likely increase over time until a saturation point is reached.¹²

This assumes that networks are stable over time. While this is generally true, as it might be for students in fraternities and sororities, it is not necessarily true for all students. Some students change their major. Other students may move from the center to the margins of their networks as is often the case for students who find it necessary to work while in college. At the same time, student preferences may change over time they mature.

All of the above says nothing about the ways the internet and popular apps such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp may have altered the ways student engage with one another inside and outside the classroom; changes that have only been accelerated by the pandemic. Such changes in student engagement and the way they may reshape networks have been largely invisible to the university and to us who teach those classes. As a reviewer of this article pointed out, these changes in student behaviours and the invisible networks that may emerge could be critical drivers for many of the changes in engagement that *are* visible to us. Be that the case, it does not follow that the university cannot play a role in how those forms of engagement arise. In the same way that faculty in the classroom can, through the use of collaborate pedagogies, whether in the classroom, online, or in blended learning environments, interrupt the tendency of students, left on their own, to recreate patterns of social and academic stratification outside the classroom, it is possible that those same pedagogies may also alter the patterns of engagement outside the classroom that emerge via the internet. But whether they do awaits further research.

⁹ Some students who, having been uncertain in their choice of major, find themselves at the edges of the network. Such students typically change majors or dropout.

¹⁰ The networks that occur in first-year classrooms, can extend beyond the classroom and lead to affiliations beyond the first year that may not have otherwise formed.

¹¹ For that to occur, faculty teaching those courses have to organize the classroom in ways that enhance the likelihood of such conversations. Left on their own, students will typically sit next to another student in their major.

¹² It should be noted that this linking process can lead students to access networks beyond the institution that might relate to their future employment.

Concluding Thoughts

Unravelling the concept of engagement and exploring the role of student networks in student success has implications for both policy and practice. For institutions, understanding the pattern of student engagements can help identify groups of students who are especially isolated and determine how their isolation is reflective of student attributes, not the least of which is race. It can also identify patterns of engagements that yield stratification among students and student groups on campus. On the other hand, network analysis can reveal those courses and programs in which students are well-connected, such as in appropriately implemented learning communities, and whose success rate, controlling for student attributes, is higher than in other programs. For faculty, such analyses can shed light not only on the effect of their pedagogical decisions on student networks within class, but also on student success in class. It can reveal how decisions about how students are arranged with one another in classroom activities affects their engagement with others in the classroom. Such arrangements, as noted earlier, can influence the character of student learning.

There is only so much institutions and faculty can, if not should do, to structure student engagement. There are countless stories of students whose lives have been transformed by seemingly random engagements with someone on campus that cannot be planned. Be that the case, it is entirely appropriate for institutions, faculty, and staff to ask what they can do to enhance student success. It is to this end that these reflections are directed.

Finally, our conversation tells us that the character of engagement and its impact on student success is more complex than typically understood. There is much more we need to know about how institutions and faculty can shape patterns of engagement to enhance student success. But what we now know is that institutions and faculty should not leave student engagement to chance.

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