

Feature Article

Reflections on Student Persistence

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Editors Comment

*The Feature for this issue—Reflections on Student Persistence—has been prepared by **Professor Vincent Tinto, Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University, United States of America (USA)** and a long-time friend and supporter of the STARS Conference. Vincent explores the case for motivation to be considered as a significant aspect of the tertiary student psyche by drawing on theoretical frameworks, research and practical experiences related to the issue. He synthesises this extensive, detailed, rich but often somewhat impenetrable data into a trilogy of clear and credible key dimensions of the motivation construct—student self-efficacy, sense of belonging and perceived value of the curriculum. This interpretation of the literature is a personal but informed reflection and is a timely piece which highlights the breadth and profundity of the presentations at this year's conference in Adelaide, Australia where students in all their diversity are central to our focus on enhancing the student experience.*

In this opening article, Vincent refers directly to the STARS papers selected for this special Conference issue of the Journal which also address the importance of student persistence, self-efficacy and building the sense of belonging within their own institutional communities (Fernandes, Ford, Rayner & Pretorius; Kahu, Nelson, & Picton; McFarlane, Spes-Skrbis & Taib; Naylor; Smallhorn). Echoing his position on social justice and his advocacy for underserved students, Vincent reminds us that educational equity gaps still exist, and he encourages us to see the issue of persistence through the eyes of the students to support their perseverance and completion and thereby help reduce educational disadvantage.

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¹Reflections on Student Persistence

For years, researchers like myself in developing theories to explain student retention have almost always taken on the perspective of the university. We have asked, as they do: What can universities do to improve student retention. Understandably it is in the interests of universities to do so as increased retention leads to a range of beneficial outcomes, not the least of which is heightened revenue. But when one speaks to students, looks at the issue of retention from their perspective and sees the university through their eyes, one does not hear students speak of being retained. They speak instead of persisting. Their interest is not in being retained - it is in persisting to degree completion even if it means transferring to another institution or taking a nested sub-degree to eventually do so. The difference in these perspectives is not trivial. Indeed, it lies at the heart of the university's ability to further increase retention and completion especially for those who have been historically underserved in tertiary education. To understand why this is the case requires a bit of a detour.

We begin with the term persistence and what students' use of that word implies. Persistence or its active form - persisting - is another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise. A student has to want to persist to degree completion in order to expend considerable effort to do so. It follows that the question universities should ask is not only what they can do to retain their students but also what they can do to influence student motivation to stay, persist, and complete their tertiary degrees.

To answer that question, we must first ask what we know about the forces shaping student motivation and in turn which of these are within the university's ability to influence. But rather than dive into a lengthy conversation of the ins and outs of student motivation theory, let me suggest that several deserve our attention, namely student self-efficacy, sense of belonging and perceived value of the curriculum.

Key dimensions of student motivation

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to succeed at a particular task or in a specific situation (Bandura, 1977). It is the outcome of the effect of past experiences on how individuals perceive themselves and their capacity to have some degree of control over their environment (locus of control). Self-efficacy is learned, not inherited. It is not generalisable in that it applies to all tasks and situations but can vary depending on the particular task or situation at hand. A person may feel capable of succeeding at one task but not another.

Self-efficacy influences how a person addresses goals, tasks, and challenges. A strong sense of self-efficacy promotes goal attainment while a weak sense undermines it. Whereas people with high self-efficacy will engage more readily in a task, expend more effort on it, and persist longer in its completion even when they encounter difficulties (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001), a person with low self-efficacy will tend to become discouraged and withdraw when encountering difficulties (Vuong, Brown-Welty,

¹ **Note:** Adapted from Tinto (2015) Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research and Practice*. and more recently online in *Inside HigherEd*, September 26, 2016 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/09/26/how-improve-student-persistence-and-completion-essay>).

& Tracz, 2010). As such, self-efficacy is the foundation upon which student success is built. Students have to believe they can succeed in their studies. Otherwise, there is little reason to continue to invest in efforts to do so.

The good news is that self-efficacy is not fixed. It is malleable and can be influenced by student experience - especially during the critical first year of university study. The fact is that while many students begin university confident in their ability to succeed, more than a few do not. But even those who enter university confident in their ability to succeed can encounter challenges that serve to weaken their sense of self-efficacy. This is particularly true during the critical first year as students seek to adjust to the heightened demands of university study. In this regard, it is telling that student success in that year is not so much a reflection of students' self-efficacy at the beginning of the first year as it is that they come to believe or continue to believe they can succeed and reach their goals as a result of their early experiences during the year (Gore, Jr., 2006).

Therefore, while it is important that universities challenge existing labels as marking some entering students as less likely to succeed than others (Steele, 1997; Yeager & Walton, 2011), it is equally important that students are able to obtain the timely support they need when they encounter early difficulties in meeting the academic, and sometimes social, demands of university study. To be effective, support must be early before student struggles undermine their motivation to persist and be structured so as to enhance student uptake of support. To do so universities have adopted a range of *early warning* systems that identify students who are struggling in the first year and beyond. In some cases, these are based on first-year course performance. In others, they are the result of predictive analytic systems that monitor a

range of student behaviors and course grades. Regardless of the form such systems take, institutions must be proactive in reaching out and supporting those students. Otherwise student uptake of support is often weak. This is the case because some students erroneously view help-seeking behavior as an admission that they are not cut out for university, others that they are the only students in class who are struggling, and still others who blame themselves for their struggles. To counter such feelings and improve uptake, it is important that universities make clear that academic struggles are the norm among first year students rather than the exception, and provide messages that show how students make use of support to succeed in university studies. But even when students seek out support they often do so too late in the semester to turn their grades around. This is why it is far better that universities not leave student access to support to chance and embed support in the curriculum and the courses that comprise the curriculum especially in the first year of university study. This is but one reason why co-requisite instruction in the first year has proven so successful in the USA².

Sense of belonging

While believing one can succeed at university is essential for persistence to completion, it does not, in itself, ensure it. For that to occur, students have to become engaged and come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional staff who value their membership - in other words, that they matter and belong. The result is the development of a *sense of belonging*. Although a sense of belonging may mirror students' experiences prior to entry that lead them to fear they do not belong at university, it is most directly shaped by the broader campus climate and students' daily interactions with

² Co-requisite developmental education enrolls students in remedial and regular versions of the same subject at the same time. Students receive targeted support to help boost their understanding and learning of the regular subject material. The traditional pre-requisite model requires the remedial version to be completed before proceeding onto the regular version.

other students, academics, professional staff and administrators, whether on-campus or on-line. It also may arise from extra-curricular activities, as Fernandes, Ford, Rayner, and Pretorius (2107) show in “Building a sense of belonging among tertiary commuter students: The Monash Non-Residential Colleges program” or from peer-to-peer programs as described by McFarlane, Spes-Skrbis and Taib (2017) in “Let’s Chat- A fresh take on the invaluable role of peer-to-peer conversation in student engagement, participation and inclusion”. It is in these and other situations that engagement with other people matters (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). But it is not engagement per se that matters - though some engagement is better than none - as it is the students’ perception of those engagements and the sense of belonging they derive from them (Hurtado & Carter, 1996, Strayhorn, 2012).³ Unfortunately, not all engagements positively impact students’ sense of belonging.

The result of a sense of belonging is often expressed as a commitment that serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise. Sense of belonging can refer to smaller communities within the institution as, for instance, with students with whom one shares a common interest (e.g. students in the same discipline or program) or background (e.g. students of similar socio-cultural backgrounds) or more broadly to the institution generally. Although the former can facilitate persistence, as it may help anchor the student to other students within the institution, it is the latter that is most directly related to student motivations to persist within the institution. This is the case because the former does not ensure the latter as a smaller community of students may see itself as an outcast from the larger institution. Nevertheless, students who perceive themselves as belonging to a specific group or the institution generally are more likely to

persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to become involved with others in ways that further promote persistence. By contrast, a student’s sense of not belonging, of being out of place, leads to a withdrawal from contact with others that further undermines motivation to persist. As importantly, feeling one does not belong in the classroom or program can lead to withdrawal from learning activities that then undermines not only the motivation to persist but also the motivation to learn. Both undermine academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Here there is much universities can do. First, they can ensure that all students see the institution as welcoming and supportive - that the culture is one of inclusion. They can do so by not only speaking to issues of exclusion but also promoting those forms of activity that require shared academic and social experiences. In the academic realm, this can take the form of cohort programs in which students learn together over time. In the classroom, it can take the form of pedagogies like cooperative and problem-based learning that when properly implemented require students to become engaged and learn together as equal partners as Smallhorn (2017) observes in “The flipped classroom: A learning model to increase student engagement not academic achievement”. In the social realm, institutions can also take steps to provide for a diversity of social groups and organisations that allow all students to find at least one small community of students with whom they share a common bond. Regardless of how they promote engagement and students’ sense of belonging, whether across campus, in academic programs, or in classrooms on-campus or on-line, institutions should do so at the very outset of students’ journey - indeed as early as orientation if not before. As is the case for self-efficacy, becoming engaged and developing a sense of academic and social belonging early in

³ This is but one reason why it is often difficult to interpret data from frequently used surveys of student engagement that employ only behavioural measures of engagement.

the first-year facilitates other forms of engagement that enhance student learning in that year and persistence to completion in the years that follow.

The curriculum

Student motivation to persist is also shaped by student perceptions of the value of what they are being asked to learn. Though what constitutes value is subject to much debate, the underlying issue is clear: Students need to perceive the material to be learned is of sufficient quality and relevance to matters that concern them now and into their future to warrant their time and effort (Tessema, Ready, & Yu, 2012). As Kahu, Nelson and Picton (2017) demonstrate in “Student interest as a key driver of engagement for first year students”, only then will students be motivated to engage with that material in ways that promote learning and, in turn, persistence. Curriculum and teaching practices that are seen as irrelevant, unhelpful, or of low quality will often yield the opposite result (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). This is especially true for students whose motivation is driven by the intrinsic rewards of university participation such as learning and personal growth. At the same time, student perceptions of the quality and relevance of the curriculum is also influenced by student learning style preferences and values. This is the case because the curriculum is not merely a collection of facts but also a set of values that influence not only which facts and concepts are presented in the curriculum but also the perspectives that are deemed appropriate to the analysis of those facts (Zepke, 2015).

Addressing this issue is challenging because student perceptions of the curriculum vary not only among different students but also among the differing subjects they are asked to learn. But there are steps institutions can and should take. First, institutions should see to it that students enrol in a field of study appropriate to their needs and interests, that they find the material within those courses sufficiently

challenging to warrant their effort and, with academic support, reasonably within their reach to master. Second, they should ensure that the curriculum, in particular, but not only, in the social sciences and humanities, is inclusive of the experiences and histories of the students who are asked to study that curriculum. Third, institutions, specifically the teaching staff, should be explicit in demonstrating how the subjects that students are asked to learn can be applied to meaningful situations in ways that have relevance to issues that concern them. This is particularly important in first-year introductory courses as they serve as gateways to courses that follow. Too often, meaningful connections in those courses are left for students to discover.

One way of making those connections is to use pedagogies, such as problem and project-based learning, that require students to apply the material they are learning to resolve concrete problems or to complete a project that frames the subject. Another is through contextualisation where students are asked to learn material within the context of another field, as is the case in enabling education where skills are taught in the context of another area of study. In this and similar cases, students are more likely to want to learn basic skills because it helps them learn a subject in which they are interested. One promotes the learning of the other.

Closing thoughts

While universities need to understand students’ perceptions and their impact on the persistence of all students, it is particularly important that universities understand how these perceptions apply for students who have been historically underrepresented in tertiary education, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Unfortunately, not all student responses lead to persistence. Sometimes it produces the opposite result. This may be particularly true among low-income students who have grown up in situations of very limited

resources. As documented by Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) in *Scarcity: Why having so little means so much*, living in a situation of scarcity influences not only a person's perception of their abilities but also how they respond to their experiences. Too often they do so in ways that undermine their success. Take for instance the situation in which low-income workers use their hard-earned paychecks to obtain payday loans that provide high interest short-term cash advances. They do so even though it often undermines their financial security leading them into greater debt. Such responses, while seemingly counterproductive from an objective observer's point of view, are often perceived by that person as the only viable response to ensure sufficient money for the week that follows.

My point in referring to Mullainathan and Shafir's (2013) work is simply to remind us that the same situation may also apply to some of our students. When encountering difficulties in their pursuit of a university degree, they may respond in ways, that while understandable from their point of view, may unintentionally undermine their success. Understanding why this is the case matters because the impact of any institutional practice is shaped by those responses. Perhaps this is why some of our policies to promote greater success among low-income and underserved students have had limited impact.

In closing, let me observe that the point of these reflections is not to argue for abandoning existing university efforts to retain their students or to suggest that the questions they pose about retaining students are misguided. Rather it is to promote another way of analyzing student success that recognizes, as does Naylor (2017) in "First year student conceptions of success: What really matters?" that students' view of their experiences can differ from those of the university. Specifically, it argues that another question that universities - and by extension all its members, academics, professional staff, and administration - should

ask themselves is: What can they do to lead students to want and have the ability to persist and complete their programs of study within the university? To do so, universities have to see the issue of persistence through the eyes of their students, hear their voices, engage with their students as partners, learn from their experiences and understand how those experiences shape their responses to university policies. Only then can universities further improve persistence and completion while also closing the continuing equity gaps that plague our societies.

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Feature article—author biography



Vincent Tinto is a Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University and the former Chair of the Higher Education Program. He has carried out research and has written extensively on higher education, particularly on student success and the impact of learning communities on student growth and attainment. His book, *Leaving College*, published by the University of Chicago Press, lays out a theory and policy perspective on student success that is considered the benchmark by which work on these issues are judged. His most recent book, *Completing College*, also published by The University of Chicago Press, lays out a framework for institutional action for student success, describes the range of programs that have been effective in enhancing student success, and the types of policies institutions should follow to successfully implement programs in ways that endure and scale-up over time.

He has received numerous recognitions and awards. He was awarded the Council of Educational Opportunity Walter O. Mason 2012 Award for his work on the retention of low-income students, the Council of Independent Colleges 2008 Academic Leadership Award, the National Institute for Staff Development International 2008 Leadership Award, and was

named Distinguished Fellow in the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations. Most recently he was the recipient of the 2015 President Harry S. Truman Award for the American Association of Community Colleges for his work for community colleges across America and the 2017 George D. Kuh award for Outstanding Contribution to Literature and Research. He has some 50 notable publications, including books, research reports, and journal articles, to his credit and has lectured across the United States, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Great Britain, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, South America and The Netherlands. From 1990 to 1996 he was associate director of the National Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. He has worked with a number of organizations, foundations, and government agencies on issues of student success and sits on a number of advisory boards including the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, and Civitas Learning.

Dr. Tinto received his B.S. from Fordham in Physics and Philosophy, his M.S. from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Physics and Mathematics, and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in Education and Sociology.