Toward a New Model of Student Persistence in Higher Education

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education,

Charlotte, NC

Publication Date: November 19, 2011

Abstract

As a group, low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students have lower persistence rates and educational attainment than their peers from higher-socioeconomic backgrounds. These gaps in college persistence and degree attainment have endured over the years with no evidence that they are diminishing in time. This is a significant problem in the field of higher education that has received little attention in the literature to date. In this work, relevant literature will be reviewed to create a new model of college student persistence specifically for low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students. This new model combines Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure and Rendon's (1994, 2002) theory of validation with a Bourdieuian framework. The resulting model is a multi-theoretical framework that highlights structural factors and individual agency. It may be well suited for capturing the complexities of low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students' postsecondary experiences. However, it is yet to be empirically tested.

Introduction

Although access to higher education is becoming more widely available to all in the U.S., many students drop out prior to the completion of their educational goals. Most often for students who begin at four-year colleges, their goal is the attainment of a bachelor's degree. In response to this problem, four-year colleges have developed intervention programs and services to try to retain students to graduation. Through such efforts, some institutions have been successful at improving the rate at which their students graduate. However, many four-year institutions have not. Broadly speaking across a national level, attrition rates or rates at which students fail to reenroll at an institution in consecutive semesters, have endured with no significant decrease in these rates over the last five years (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Whitmore, 2006; Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011).

Furthermore, when considering the retention and persistence rates for students from traditionally marginalized groups in higher education, such as students from low-income or low-socioeconomic backgrounds, working-class and first-generation college students the numbers are worse than aggregate rates. Although access to higher education for these students has increased in the U.S., the gaps in four-year completion rates remain between them and their more privileged peers. In fact, four-year completion gaps between students from lower-income and higher-income backgrounds seem to have increased somewhat between 1994 and 2000 (Horn and Berger, 2004, p. 24).

Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, and Shepherd's (2010) analysis of a nationally representative sample of students who first enrolled in a four-year college in the 2003-2004 academic year indicates how wide these gaps are today. Within this cohort, only 47% of students from the lowest family income level attained a bachelor's degree after five years,

whereas this rate is 76% for students from the highest family income level. Similar gaps in four-year degree completion rates exist and endure between students with less formally educated and more formally educated parents. Of those students in the cohort who have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or higher, 69% achieved a bachelor's degree within five years after starting their postsecondary education at a four-year institution in 2003. In contrast, for those students whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less, only 40% attained a bachelor's degree in five years (Radford et al., 2010, p. 12).

As a group, low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working-class students have lower persistence rates and educational attainment than their peers from higher-socioeconomic backgrounds (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2006; Walpole, 2007). Additionally, as Walpole (2003, 2007) points out, low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students compose an overlapping group of students whose unique experiences in comparison to their peers' experiences are not well explained in the existing literature. Walpole (2007) argues that these four categories of students as defined by researchers demonstrate varying but related approaches to studying students who face similar challenges in the educational system due to their social class backgrounds. Thus, she suggests the umbrella term of "economically and educationally challenged" to describe this student group.

Walpole (2007) asserts that by looking at these students as a group, scholars have a means to connect related areas of research and consequently yield new and important insights to increase the rates of persistence and degree attainment for students from lower social class backgrounds. Furthermore, the researcher states that thinking holistically about these students provides a way to acknowledge the structural issues that students marginalized by their social class backgrounds face, as well as their acts of individual agency within their pursuit of higher

education. She specifies that without an approach that simultaneously acknowledges structure and agency, the opportunity gap between students from more and less privileged social class backgrounds will remain.

I agree with Walpole that examining low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students as a holistic group is beneficial for research, practice and policy. I also agree with her notion that a framework to examine such students needs to account for both structural factors and individual agency. However, I have trouble with calling this collective group "economically and educationally challenged students." Therefore, in my work I will consider low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students together as a large group of students who face similar challenges due to their traditionally marginalized social class background, and in this paper I will work toward developing a new persistence theory suited to these students' postsecondary experiences and outcomes. However, I will not use the label "economically and educationally challenged" to refer to this student group.

Overall, studies to develop and test theories of student retention that seek to explain why some students leave and others persist are of central importance to the field of higher education. As the need for college graduates with earned degrees has grown in time, studies of institutional retention and student persistence have become extremely important as our increasingly diverse society becomes more reliant on workers who possess four-year degrees. The more we study retention and persistence, the more we are able to understand the intricacies involved in helping a diverse array of students achieve bachelor's degrees.

Moreover, studying the postsecondary experiences and outcomes of low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working-class students in contrast to the

postsecondary experiences and outcomes of their more privileged peers is critical to the field of higher education. This is because obtaining a college degree is a crucial component of our nation's opportunity structure. Therefore, understanding how social class affects the postsecondary experiences and outcomes of students is of major importance. In fact, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) write that investigating the differential effects of college for particular groups of students is one of the most urgent areas for higher education research, and Tinto (2006) states that understanding the persistence of students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds in contrast to their more privileged peers is one of the most pressing needs in college persistence research.

In the retention and persistence literature, Tinto's (1993) interactionalist and longitudinal model of institutional departure has become one of the best-known and most often cited theories. In fact, Tinto's theory has been described as holding "paradigmatic stature" in the field (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). However, as will be described in this paper, Tino's model does not accurately describe the experiences of low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students. But, Tinto's model has potential for informing a new persistence model that fits this group of students more fully. Thus, Tinto's theory will be used as a springboard for developing a theory to better explain the persistence of students who may be classified in one or more of the following categories: low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation, and working-class.

As Braxton and Hirschy (2005) point out, the problem of college student departure is best characterized as an ill-structured problem. Ill-structured problems defy a single solution and require a number of possible strategies that still may not alleviate them. Therefore, as the authors indicate, a multi-theoretical approach to understanding college student persistence and

departure is needed. Also, combining several theoretical lenses to create a new framework greatly increases the complexity of the new model in comparison to the models used to generate it. This is especially beneficial for explaining the persistence of students from lower social class backgrounds. Walpole (2007) claims that increasing the complexity of theoretical frameworks to address the complex realities of such students' lived experiences and to account for both structure and agency is needed to understand low-income, low-socioeconomic, first-generation, and working class students' lives and decisions. Moreover, the author suggests that such a new framework may be achieved by combining existing overlapping theoretical frameworks.

In this paper, Tino's (1993) theory of student departure and its major critiques first will be reviewed. Then, Rendon's (1994, 2002) theory of validation—a framework for student persistence that appears to be especially promising for supporting traditionally marginalized college students—will be introduced. As will be explained within, Rendon's framework compliments Tinto's model particularly well for understanding the college experiences of students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. Next, by combining these composite ideas along with a Bourdieuian lens to view the social world, a new multi-theoretical framework for student persistence in higher education will be developed. With the incorporation of a Bourdieuian lens, the new framework will address how the particular structural and individual agency factors students from lower social class backgrounds face in their pursuit of higher education contribute to their decisions in college, and ultimately to their attainment or lack of attainment of a college degree. In these ways, the new complex, multi-theoretical framework will better account for the multiple and overlapping factors that affect lower-socioeconomic status students' opportunities and decisions in higher education.

The new persistence model developed within aims to account for a fuller picture of the experiences of low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working-class students as they partake in postsecondary education. It also aims to better delineate the factors that affect low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working-class students' decision making while these students are in the system of higher education. It is my hope that this new model informs ways that researchers, practitioners and policymakers may act to increase the number of low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working-class students who persist in postsecondary education and obtain college degrees.

Overview of Relevant Literature

Retention or Persistence?

Before specific theories are explored in the literature, it is imperative to first note terminology distinctions. In higher education, retention and persistence are two terms that are often used to refer to the same phenomena. However, these two terms are distinct and should not be used interchangeably. Reason (2009) explains that retention is an organizational phenomenon that focuses attention on the institutional goal of keeping students enrolled for consecutive semesters until degree completion, while persistence is an individual phenomenon that focuses attention on the individual goal of a student reaching his or her specific educational goal attainment. In other words, colleges and universities retain students, while students persist to a goal. The assumption underlying retention is often retention to degree. However, an individual student's goal may be different. Thus, a student may successfully persist to her goal without being retained to graduation. For this reason, educational attainment is a term often used in higher education studies to capture the variability of students' goals and to disconnect retention and persistence.

Moreover, as Berger & Lyon (2005) describe, it was not until the late 1990s when scholars fully recognized that persistence and retention are distinct concepts. During this time higher education researchers noted that while retention is an important concept for students and for institutions in particular, many students attend more than one college to earn an undergraduate degree. Since then, and with the assumption that graduation to a bachelor's degree is the goal to which most students are striving, student success in higher education has been increasingly recognized as the ability of a student to persist to the completion of a four-year degree at one or more institutions. In this paper, the creation of a new framework for explaining low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students' experiences in postsecondary education will focus on student persistence in the system of postsecondary education, rather than on institutional retention.

Student Retention Research and the Significance of Tinto's Work

Research on student retention in higher education has evolved over the past forty years and is "voluminous" (Tinto, 2005). The first retention studies followed a post-WWII boom that produced the most growth in student enrollment in the history of higher education. In the 1960s, students who were described as "dropouts" within these large cohorts were studied, creating a body of empirical literature. Then, in the early 1970s, Spady (1970, 1971) reviewed this literature and created a descriptive theory of dropout behavior by applying Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide. Building off Spady's work, Tinto (1975) created a predictive theory of dropout behavior from institutions of higher education. Tinto later modified his theory twice (1987, 1993) in order to incorporate the work of others who have criticized or attempted to extend his framework.

In the 1960s and 1970s when Tinto (1975) first created his theory, the focus in higher education research on "student dropouts" framed thinking in general to be institutionally-oriented rather than system-oriented. Therefore, Tinto's model seeks to explain why and how it is that some individuals leave the institution where they began their postsecondary studies. Unlike previous research on college dropouts, including Spady's work, Tinto's work aimed to explain, not simply to describe, the processes that bring individuals to leave their primary institutions of higher education. Thus, Tinto's model was the first explanatory theory in the literature. Tinto intended to make his theory useful for researchers in explaining variations in student leaving behaviors within institutions, and for higher education administrators in altering institutional policy to increase student retention to graduation.

Additionally, Tinto's theory is significant for detailing a model that made explicit connections between a student's environment—mainly the academic and social systems of an institution—and the individuals who shape this environment as factors in student retention and departure. In this way, Tinto's model uses a sociological lens to understand student retention. Previous ways of thinking about college student retention, especially those that took a psychological lens, saw student dropout as a reflection of a student's attributes—mainly the lack of skill or motivation inherent in the student to persist (Tinto, 2006). Thus, Tinto's theory is one of the first to focus on how it may be that institutions fail, rather than on how students fail when students depart before graduation.

Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure

Concerned with understanding institutional departure, Tinto's model focuses on college students as they move from the end of their freshman year to the beginning of their sophomore year at the same institution (see Figure 1). The model is longitudinal and interactional in

character. It is longitudinal in that it seeks to explain students' persistence or voluntary withdrawal behavior from college at the end of their freshman year by considering their experiences in college over the course of that year. It is interactional in the sense that the formal and informal academic and social domains of college are interwoven, where events in one domain may directly or indirectly influence events in the other. The theory is also interactional in the sense that it looks at both the individual and the institution and how the interactions that a student has with the institution influences his or her departure decisions.

When creating his theory of student departure, Tinto (1975) looked toward frameworks in sociology and social anthropology—specifically Durkheim's (1951) study of suicide in human societies (as Spady (1970, 1971) had done), and Van Gennep's (1960) study of the rites of passage to membership in tribal societies. In *Suicide*, Durkheim claimed that egotistical suicide arises when individuals are unable to establish membership in the communities of a society. He said that this occurs when individuals are not socially integrated and intellectually integrated into the society. Tinto applied Durkheim's concepts of social integration and intellectual integration to his model of institutional departure by including social integration and academic integration as central components of it. Similarly, Tinto applied concepts from Van Gennep's work, *Rites of Passage*, on the ascent of individuals from youth to adult status in traditional societies. Van Gennep claimed that this process was marked by three distinct stages: separation, transition and incorporation. Influenced by this framework, Tinto included the three stages of separation, transition, and incorporation into his model of college students' institutional departure.

In sum, Tinto's model explains that institutional departure decisions arise out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual (from a specific family background, with given skills and prior educational experiences, and with particular initial intentions and

commitments to their institution and to attaining a degree) and members of the academic and social systems of the institution. The individual's experiences in those systems, which are indicated by her amount of academic and social integration into the institution, continually modify her intentions and commitments regarding future educational activities. Subsequently, departure decisions are made based on these modified intentions and commitments arising from the student's college experiences.

Thus, Tinto's model claims that the more integrated a student is into the academic and social systems of the institution, the more likely a student will be committed to the institution and to the goal of graduation and as a result, the more likely the student will persist to graduation at that institution. Tinto's revisions in the 1993 model acknowledge the influences of connections with external communities (such as family and/or outside work) on students' departure decisions. However, Tinto (1993) makes clear that external communities are not as influential to students' institutional departure decisions as are campus communities (p. 129).

Limitations of Tinto's Model

Tinto's model is limited in that its sole focus is on student departure from the initial institution where a student was first enrolled. Thus, whether or not an individual departs from the system of higher education, or transfers to another institution is beyond the scope of Tinto's model. However, many students who leave their initial college or university transfer to another one rather than drop out of postsecondary education completely. Furthermore, some students, more often those from less-wealthy families and those with less-educated parents, begin their postsecondary education at four-year institutions and then reverse-transfer into two-year community colleges (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009). Therefore, a model to explain low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working-class students' experiences in higher

education would account for students' decisions to persist in higher education at an institution other than their primary one, as well as students' decisions to leave from the system of higher education completely.

Another limitation of Tinto's model is how it looks only at students as they move from the end of their first year in college to the beginning of their second year. As Nora, Barlow and Crisp (2005) describe, student persistence is a longitudinal process of varied lengths in students' lives. While students may reenroll for a second or third year of college, dropping out is still a consideration for many of them. Moreover, it should be noted that students may decide at any time (mid-year or mid-semester) to drop out of postsecondary education or to transfer to another college. Thus, a model of student persistence that more accurately describes low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students' postsecondary experiences would encompass a much larger and continuous picture than their first-to-second-year experiences.

Furthermore, Tinto's model of student departure is limited since it is based on traditional, white middle-class student populations who begin their postsecondary education at residential four-year universities. This is likely due to the fact that the empirical research Tinto used to develop his theory in 1975 studied such individuals, since the population of college students at that time was much more homogenous than it is today. Given that the model was based on the experiences of these students, the model does not necessarily describe the experiences of nontraditional postsecondary education students, such as individuals who are ethnic/racial minorities, nontraditionally aged students, students with disabilities, commuter students, community college students, international students, and low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation, and working-class students.

Criticisms of Tinto's Model

Two major criticisms of Tinto's model stem from Tinto's adaptation of Van Gennep's (1960) and Durkheim's (1951) notions within his framework. Firstly, Tinto's application of Van Gennep's rites of passage theory implies that students who enter college must disassociate themselves from membership in their past communities of their families, local high schools and local neighborhoods. Tinto explains that in this first stage of separation, some degree of transformation and perhaps rejection of the norms of these past communities must occur since they are likely to be different from the norms appropriate to college life. Therefore, he tells that entering students have to physically as well as socially disassociate themselves from their communities of origin (Tinto, 1993, p. 96). Secondly, Tinto's application of Durkheim's notion of insufficient integration leading to egotistical suicide implies that students must hold the values of the institution, otherwise, students who hold deviant values will become isolated and this will lead to their withdrawal from the institution. Tinto claims that students must acquire the appropriate norms and patterns of behavior to become integrated into the academic and social communities of the institution (Tinto, 1993, p. 97).

Taken together, these ideas imply that incoming students must give up who they once were and where they came from to be successful in college. They must lessen if not sever ties with their families and friends from the past, and they must adopt the values, norms, and behaviors that the institution of higher education deems appropriate in order to become a fully integrated member of the college, and in turn, in order to ensure their attainment of a college degree. Put simply, students who fail to disassociate themselves from their home cultures and who fail to assimilate to their respective college campus environments are less likely to persist.

Tierney (1999) points out that this message from Tinto's framework is one of "cultural suicide," and moreover, since the message is for the student to assimilate to the institution rather than for the institution to adapt at all for the student, if a student fails to persist in higher education the blame falls on the student, not on the institution. This message of necessity of disassociation from an individual's home culture and assimilation to her institution's culture for success in college is especially problematic for students from low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working-class backgrounds. Upwardly mobile first-generation working-class students in college face difficult emotional dynamics in their families (Lucey, Melody, & Walkerdine, 2003), yet ties with their families may be necessary for their postsecondary success (Nunez, 2005). Furthermore, the extraordinary challenges these students face in postsecondary education in comparison to their more privileged peers become masked, since in this view the responsibility for not persisting in postsecondary education solely falls on the student rather than on any structural factors, such as financial obstacles or discrimination. Moreover, in this view since institutions will not adapt to meet the needs of their diverse student populations, institutions become sites of cultural assimilation.

Cultural Integrity and Interculturalism in Higher Education

Tierney's (1992, 1999) work on cultural integrity advocates for the view that postsecondary institutions must accommodate for and honor students' cultural differences. When this occurs, campuses will not be sites of assimilation, but instead will become more democratic spheres of opportunity. Tierney (1999) asserts that when institutions affirm and respect students' cultural backgrounds and encourage them to achieve high academic goals, "stereotype threat"—or circumstances in which individuals, often from minority communities although not necessarily, are stereotyped in ways that preclude academic success—is cancelled

and replaced with a structure of support that assumes that students have or can gain the requisite skills to succeed in college.

Taking this idea a step further, Tanaka (2000) calls for interculturalism in higher education. Interculturalism is a process of learning and sharing across difference where no one culture dominates. This places all cultures and social positions under the same scrutiny and cultivates the ability of each student to have a voice and a forum to tell his or her story. Combining the ideas of Tierney and Tanaka creates a perspective in which students are not seen as "deficient" or as "a problem." Rather, in this perspective students are seen as persons of value and their "subjectivities," like gender, ethnicity, social class background and sexual orientation for example, are supported in institutions of higher education. Such an intercultural perspective in postsecondary education would create supportive environments in higher education institutions for low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students.

Rendon's Theory of Validation

In alignment with Tierney and Tanaka, Rendon (1994) asserts that rather than forcing nontraditional college students to adapt to a new culture to be successful in higher education, the culture of the academy must change to better meet the needs of today's diverse student population. This is an important idea for creating supportive environments at postsecondary institutions for students from lower social class backgrounds to persist in and succeed. Thus, Rendon's work compliments Tinto's model and fills in the crucial gap in Tinto's model where cultural assimilation may exist.

Support for Rendon's (1994, 2002) validation framework is found in the researcher's study of first-year nontraditional students—particularly students in a predominantly minority

community college and students in a predominantly African American state university—who came to college expecting to fail. Within their first year, these students who originally doubted themselves became excited about higher learning, and began to believe in their innate capacity to learn and in their ability to become successful college students. In this study, Rendon (1994) focused on the process of how such changes in students' perceptions of themselves came to be. Rendon used Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule's (1986) research on women as learners, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, as the lens for her analysis. In Belenkey et al.'s work, the researchers found that women who had been treated as stupid or incompetent yearned for acceptance and validation. Through this lens, Rendon saw a similar phenomenon occurring with these particular minority students.

In Rendon's (1994) study, it was found that having an individual either in- or out-of-class take initiative to lend a helping hand to a student, or to do something that affirmed the student as capable of doing academic work, or to do something that supported the student in her social adjustment mattered most in transforming a student's beliefs about herself. Rendon's theory of validation (1994, 2002) demonstrates recognition, respect and appreciation for students' cultures and their families and communities. It posits that when individuals in- and out-of-class take a proactive role in reaching out to students in a non-patronizing way to affirm and support them, students will see themselves as able to become successful in college and in life. With validation theory then, nontraditional students do not have to transform themselves for a college. Rather, the college has to reach out to nontraditional students and be genuinely accepting, supportive, and encouraging of them.

Rendon (1994) defines validation as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p.

44). Rendon's theory of validation has six elements: the first places responsibility for initiating contact with students on institutional agents such as faculty and counselors; the second states that when validation is present, students feel capable of learning as well as a sense of worth; the third declares that validation is a prerequisite to student development; the fourth tells how validation may occur in- and out-of-class and how validating agents may be found inside and outside of college who promote academic excellence and personal growth; the fifth tells that validation is a developmental process as opposed to an end in itself; and the sixth states that validation is especially needed early in a student's college experience.

Moreover, Rendon (1994) outlines that there are two types of validation: academic validation and interpersonal validation. Academic validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to assist students to "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (p. 40). Interpersonal validation occurs when interactions with in- and out-of-class agents foster "personal and social adjustment" (p.42). Additionally, Rendon (2002) affirms that validation does not appear to coddle students or make them weak, and that validating environments should be intentional, proactive and systematic—not an afterthought or a byproduct of a program developed for students.

Rendon (1994, 2002) describes how in- and out-of-class validating experiences are especially important for certain nontraditional student populations including students from low-income and low-socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation college students, and students from working-class backgrounds. This is because while in college, these students may be experiencing invalidation from their friends and families. Their friends and family members may be telling these students that they are wasting their time attending college, and they may be discouraging them from going to college, and also teasing them for attending college. Thus,

Rendon claims that validating experiences, such as when agents reach out to encourage, affirm, and support students, have a particularly significant impact on low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students' college success.

Additionally, Rendon (1994) found that nontraditional students do not perceive involvement as them taking the initiative, but rather as when someone takes an active role in assisting them. She explains that nontraditional students may want to get involved in college activities but students like those from low-income backgrounds and those who are the first in their family to attend college may find it difficult to get involved on their own. These students may not know questions to ask and they may be reluctant to ask questions that make them appear stupid or lazy. Also, since these students are unfamiliar with how the higher education system works, they cannot ask what they do not know. For these reasons, Rendon (2002) concludes that institutions cannot simply assume that all they have to do is promote involvement and offer opportunities to get involved for nontraditional students to do so. She states that institutional agents, not students, should be expected to take the first step to not only promote involvement but to affirm students as knowers and as valuable members of the college community.

In general, Rendon (2002) claims that when the college world is in opposition to the world of the student, it is difficult for a student to get involved and take full advantage of all of the academic and student support services in the college, but when the college world reflects and affirms the world of the student, it is easier for a student to get involved in the academic and social life of the institution. Rendon (2002) calls for research to explore the extent to which validation is a prerequisite to student involvement in college, and Barnett (2011) answered that call for research by studying students' interactions with faculty in the community college setting and focusing on the way that validating interactions may influence students' persistence

decisions. In this way, Barnett (2011) combined Tinto's and Rendon's frameworks to examine patterns of persistence among community college students.

Research Combining Tinto's and Rendon's Theories

In her research, Barnett (2011) utilized Rendon's (1994, 2002) theory of validation as a framing mechanism to test two propositions in Tinto's (1993) model: the proposition that faculty-student interactions influence academic integration, and the proposition that academic integration influences students' intent to persist at their college. Hence, the study tested the relationship between faculty/staff interaction, academic integration, and intentions in Tinto's model. Barnett hypothesized that faculty and others may reach out to students in validating ways that lead them to feel more academically integrated in college, and in turn this feeling would contribute to their intent to persist in college. Through principal components analysis, Barnett had four subconstructs of faculty validation emerge: students known and valued, caring instruction, appreciation for diversity, and mentoring. Using a sample of 333 diverse community college students, Barnett found that after controlling for students' age, gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, number of credits taken in the semester and college GPA, faculty validation strongly predicted students' sense of academic integration in college, with caring instruction as the strongest predictor. Therefore, the study provided empirical support for Rendon's proposition that validation influences student persistence in college by showing evidence that validation is a pre-requisite for integration on campus. In addition, Barnett's study supported and elaborated on Tinto's theory around two of its propositions.

Questioning "Integration" in Persistence Research

In her work combining Tinto's framework of institutional departure and Rendon's theory of validation, Barnett (2011) reveals how operationalizing "academic integration" is not simple

to do, since the term is widely and divergently used. Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) also tell how the term lacks a common definition and understanding, and warn how this can lead to unclear communication, sloppy scholarship and ineffective practice. For example Wolf-Wendel and colleagues state that in research, integration is often mistakenly referred to as an outcome variable rather than as an environmental variable of what students experience once on campus. In her study, Barnett correctly used academic integration as an environmental variable, with intent to persist as an outcome variable.

Furthermore, in Barnett's (2011) study the researcher used Tinto's definition of integration found in a segment of the conclusion of the 1993 version of his book, where he refers to integration as a sense of "competent membership" (p. 208). Tinto employs this term to connote a sense of possessing the knowledge and skills needed for success in the college environment (competence), as well as a sense of belonging or being a part of the college community (membership). Barnett used this definition by Tinto because it is highly compatible with Rendon's description of the benefits derived from validation. It is important to note that the revisions made in Tinto's 1993 version of *Leaving College* were in response to critiques by Tierney (1992) and others that Tinto's theory, with its focus on "integration," is a cultural assimilation model. With this, Tinto broadened his scope of what is meant by "integration" by using and explaining the term "competent membership" in his 1993 revision.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) claim that the problem of researchers operationalizing integration in many different ways stems from a major theoretical dilemma. They argue that researchers' interpretations of Tinto's constructs of social and academic integration have been unclear and not uniform due to of the lack of clarity in Tinto's applications of Durkeheim's (1951) concept of integration into his model of student departure. Hurtdao and Carter point out

how Spady (1970, 1971) used in his model an empirical definition of perceived social integration that encompasses students' subjective sense of belonging and "fitting in" on campus, as well as students' perceptions of the warmth of their interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of feeling unpressured by "normative" differences between them and the college environment. Therefore, Spady's original notion of social integration incorporates a psychological dimension that is distinct from, and can be influenced by students' interactions with the campus environment. In other words, Spady's model posits that students' interactions in the social and academic systems are conceptually distinct from their subjective sense of integration.

In contrast, Hurtado and Carter (1997) argue that Tinto (1975, 1987) failed to make this distinction. In Tinto's (1993) revised model, Hurtado and Carter (1997) draw attention to how Tinto posits that participation in the social and academic systems is distinct from social and academic integration, but does not include a description of this distinction that can guide researchers' empirical tests of the relationship. In turn, many researchers who operationalize Tinto's notions of academic and social integration mistakenly capture information on students' academic and social participation, rather than their psychological sense of integration. As shown by Rendon (1994, 2002), with regard to social and academic participation on campus, it is the quality of these interactions that matter, not solely the number of times these interactions occur. Thus, counting the number of interactions does not represent "integration." Therefore, Hurtado and Carter (1997) assert that an empirically distinct measure of a psychological sense of integration that captures an individual's view of whether she feels included in the college community is needed within theories of student departure from college.

In response, Hurtado and Carter (1997) look to Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) research in sociology that distinguishes between perceptions of group cohesion based on individuals'

perceptions, and observed cohesion based on researchers' assumptions of what constitutes cohesion. The first construct of perceived cohesion encompasses the extent to which individuals feel "stuck to" particular social groups, and it has two dimensions: a sense of belonging, and feelings of morale associated with group membership. Hurtado and Carter focus on "sense of belonging" to capture the missing construct of "perceived integration," since it contains both cognitive and affective elements in an individual's cognitive evaluation of his or her role in relation to the larger group, and since it results in an affective response. Hurtdao and Carter assert that studying a sense of belonging allows higher education researchers to assess which forms of interaction in both the academic and social spheres enhance students' affiliation and identity with their college.

To get to the bottom of what is meant by "integration," Wolf-Wendel and colleagues (2009) interviewed expert higher education researchers in the field of student retention, including Vincent Tinto. When asked to describe what integration is, Tinto responded that it is a "state of perception or fit" (p. 419). He elaborated that the term integration includes the idea of learning the rules of the game, or the culture of the institution, and also that one feels included and valued as a member of the college community. In the interview, when asked about the critique by Tierney, Hurtado and others of integration implying assimilation for nontraditional students, Tinto agreed with the critique. In fact, Tinto believes that integration is a problematic term, and he stated, "I don't use the word integration anymore—haven't used it in decades" (p. 423). He explained that when he and Spady had first used the term, due to the historical context of the time, the term was meant to be the opposite of exclusion or segregation. Tinto continued, "In the current context, the word doesn't make sense. It needs to be gotten rid of " (p. 424). As a substitute for the term "integration," Tinto suggested "sense of belonging," as Hurtado and

Carter (1997) have. Tinto explained, "Students need to feel connected in ways that do not marginalize or ghettoize. They need to feel welcomed not threatened" (p. 424). In understanding "sense of belonging" (formerly "integration"), Wolf-Wendle et al. (2009) conclude that it involves a reciprocal relationship: "To become integrated, to feel like you belong, a student must learn and adopt the norms of the campus culture but the institution is also transformed by the merger" (p. 425).

While Tinto tells how "integration" should no longer be used in his theory, he suggests that his theory as written is still accurate as a predictor of retention. He clarifies that part of the problem is that researchers are trying to simplify the measure of "integration," and they are not looking at the theory in its complexity. In agreement with Tinto about the usefulness of his theory, Hurtado and Carter (1997) claim that researchers continue to find valuable ideas in Tinto's (1993) revised model, such as its emphasis on the importance of the college environment and the central idea that students must be engaged in the life of a college. Thus, they state that Tinto's (1993) model may be a useful springboard for future theory and empirical study.

Toward a New Model of Student Persistence

I agree with Hurtado and Carter's (1997) notion that there are valuable ideas in Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, especially when complimented by Rendon's (1994, 2002) theory of validation (as Barnett (2011) did) for studying the persistence of students in higher education from low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class backgrounds. Furthermore, I agree with Hurtado and Carter (1997), Barnett (2011), and Tinto that using the term "sense of belonging" to describe individuals' perceived cohesion with social groups is a more useful and accurate way of understanding college student persistence. Furthermore, I believe that incorporating Rendon's (1994, 2002) theory of validation with a

modified version of Tinto's theory can explain very well why it is that some students feel a sense of belonging and others do not to their institutional contexts. Put simply, when students perceive that they are validated by individuals in a social group they will perceive a sense of belonging to that group, and when students do not perceive that they are validated by individuals in a social group they will not perceive a sense of belonging to that group. Since validation is especially important for college students who come from traditionally marginalized social class backgrounds in higher education, a framework that combines Rendon's theory and Tinto's modified theory will be especially applicable for understanding the experiences, persistence related decisions and outcomes of students from lower-income and less formally educated families.

Therefore, by incorporating the ideas reviewed in this paper with a Bourdieuian framework, I have created a new theory of student persistence to more fully describe low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students' experiences in college (see Figure 2). Combining the three major theories of Tinto, Rendon, and Bourdieu into one model allows for a multi-theoretical approach to understanding student persistence and departure decisions that incorporates both structure and agency in students' lives.

Incorporating Tinto's and Rendon's Theories into the Model

At first glance, it can be seen how the new model is structurally similar to Tinto's (1993) model of longitudinal departure. Like Tinto's model, it is symmetrical, interactional, and includes both the academic and social spheres of the college environment. As in Tinto's model, the academic and social domains of college influence each other, and interactions in both formal and informal contexts of these domains are incorporated. Also similar to Tinto's model, students' initial intentions, goals, and commitments influence their interactions with the college

environment, and these in turn, influence the students' sense of belonging (note that sense of belonging is used instead of integration as previously discussed). Another notion both models share is that a student's experiences in college affect the student's intentions, goals, and commitments, and in turn, these modified intentions influence the student's decision making about college.

Although it may not be evident at first glance, this new model is very different from Tinto's (1993) model. The new model incorporates how students' perceptions of themselves, perceptions of the college environment, and perceptions of how well they fit in the environment shape students' desires, and actions in college. With the inclusion of students' perceptions, the new model implies that students' interactions with their environments matter, and that different students will engage differently within college environments. Therefore, the model is applicable for understanding the college experiences and college decision making of nontraditional college students.

The incorporation of Rendon's (1994, 2002) theory of validation also helps the model to be explanatory of nontraditional college students' experiences—especially those from low-income and less formally educated college backgrounds. Through the inclusion of the theory of validation into the model, the new model emphasizes that it is not the number of interactions in the formal and informal academic and social spheres of the college that matter for students, but the quality of these interactions that matter. According to the new model, students who have interactions in the formal and informal academic and social realms of the college that are validating experiences *for them* will feel a sense of belonging in the academic and social lives of the college as a result. What is important about the occurrence of validating experiences is not whether or not they objectively occur, but rather that students' subjectively perceive them to

occur. In other words, students who perceive that they experience academic and interpersonal validation as college students will feel that they "fit" in this role and into their college communities.

Another significant difference in the new persistence model compared to Tinto's model is that it acknowledges that students, in some sense, change in college as a result of their institutional experiences. Change in this case is a descriptive term that does not imply directionality such as progression, like the concept of development does. In this way, the new multi-theoretical framework may be considered a college impact model that focuses on how student change comes about, and brings attention to potential environmental and sociological origins of student change (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The illustration of college student change within the new model is in line with Kaufman and Feldman's (2004) sociological approach to understanding how the institutional and social environment impacts the formation of college students' self-perceived identities. Through their qualitative work, Kaufman and Feldman (2004) have found that the experience of college plays an important constitutive role in forming the self-perceived identities of college students. The new persistence model takes this into account. It shows how when a student feels her actions are validated by others (such as peers or faculty) within a particular social or academic institutional context, she feels a sense of belonging in that context. Thus, the college environment reinforces her new felt identity related to this context. Subsequently, the student perceives herself in a certain way that she may not have prior to her interactions with the individuals in the college context. In turn, the new or modified self-perceived identity the student feels affects her intentions, goals, and commitments, which ultimately guide her decision-making about her postsecondary education.

Incorporating Bourdieu's Theory into the Model

The new multi-theoretical framework to explain low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class student persistence in college also incorporates a Bourdieuian lens to better capture the experiences of these students. Bourdieu's framework constantly seesaws between an examination of things at the individual level, and an examination of things at the larger social structure level. This adds strength to the model of student persistence since it is able to look at students' local contexts nested in larger societal forces. Moreover, this seesaw between the local and societal levels highlights the interaction of agency and structure in students' postsecondary education experiences and decisions.

The addition of Bourdieu's framework helps to explain the challenges students face due to their social class positions. However, it does not lock these students in for defeat. Bourdieu's framework challenges the idea that social structures determine one's life chances regardless of one's actions or free will. It focuses on the ways in which one may be able to use agency to influence social structures in some instances, and in other instances the ways in which an individual is affected, even subconsciously, by social structures. Therefore, in a Bourdieuian lens, individuals' actions are made in light of the structural context surrounding their lives, and in turn the structural forces are influenced by individuals' actions. Thus, individuals' actions and outlooks, which are rooted in personal history, shape and are shaped by social structural events and practices, and consequently a dialectal reformulation of lived experience is created. This notion of the interaction of agency and structure is what differentiates Bourdieu's work from deterministic work that argues that structure trumps agency, as found in Lewis's (1969) culture of poverty framework for example.

Overall, from a Bourdieuian perspective, individuals of different social locations are socialized differently, or in other words, have different practices (Bourdieu, 1977a). In Bourdieu's framework, practice constitutes the actions taken by individual actors in fields (or contexts) of interaction and it is shaped by multiple forces interacting together, including the rules governing the field as well as the relative positions of the individuals, institutions, and/or groups involved, and the relationships between them in the specific field. These actions seek to maximize an individual's potential in a field given her habitus and capital.

Moreover, using a Bourdieuian framework strengthens the new persistence model because Bourdieu's framework accounts for students' participation in several contexts or fields simultaneously. For example, a "State University" college student may also be daughter, a member of the university's cheerleading team, an active member of a church, a physics major, a member of the class of 2016, and a part-time employee at a clothing store among other things. In this way, college students are members of many communities that are both internal and external to their institutions. This may be especially true for students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds that are more likely to work outside of the university, be commuter students, and have important family commitments in comparison to their peers.

In general, college students are involved in many different contexts, or fields, each having unique members and practices. Although students' affiliations and memberships in some communities may be stronger than in others, each of their community membership requires commitments that students must negotiate. Hence, by incorporating a Bourdieuian lens, the new persistence theory is able to account for students' participation in multiple communities and the multiple commitments that stem from their membership. In the new persistence framework, these notions are embeded within students' personal attributes and their perceptions of self. This

is because the communities that students are involved in and feel attached to, and the commitments students uphold in relation to these communities contribute to shaping students' self-perceived identities.

Habitus is another factor that contribute to students' self-perceptions in the new multi-theoretical framework. Bourdieu (1984) describes habitus as the set of transposable dispositions and preferences of an individual, rooted in his or her personal history. Habitus can be understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions that an individual has, which functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions. It is derived from the predominantly subconscious internalization of objective chances that are common to members of a status group, and these subconscious notions are particularly rooted in early childhood. Bourdieu's notion of habitus provides a mechanism for researchers to uncover the subconscious, internalized sense of accessibility to educational opportunity that individuals have for themselves (Horvat, 2001). As Bourdieu (1984) discusses in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, the same principle behind habitus is also behind the division of social groups into status groups. Thus, habitus has implications for understanding the practical activity of research into education, as well as for understanding the role of education in the social reproduction of status groups.

In the new framework, habitus is incorporated under students' personal attributes and self-perceptions since it is through one's habitus that an individual develops a sense of her place in the world and the availability or accessibility of a variety of social worlds for her. Habitus represents an individual's internalization of possibility for herself. It includes her views of what is possible for her plans and actions in the social world, including her aspirations, beliefs, desires and self-efficacy. For some students, habitus accounts for their lack of choice in their actions.

For example, for a female with parents who graduated from Ivy League universities, not going to college or dropping out of college may not be options for her due to her parents' expectations. In contrast, for a female in a low-income single parent family with a disabled younger sibling, going to college may not be an option for her as she must take care of her younger brother full-time while her mother goes to work full-time. In this way, one's habitus includes notions about what is possible for one's self to achieve, as well as what is not possible for one's self to achieve. As seen in the new model for low-socioeconomic status and first-generation college student persistence, habitus is a strong influence on a student's intentions, goals and commitments.

Another Bourdieuian aspect that comprises students' personal attributes and influences students' intentions, goals, and commitments in the new persistence model is capital. Bourdieu uses the term capital to describe the social products through which individuals carry out social activity within a field (Grenfell & James, 1998). Bourdieu (1986) outlines three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. Economic capital is financial wealth. Social capital exists as an individual's or a group's sphere of contacts. Thirdly, cultural capital is the product of education and it exists in three forms: 1) embodied cultural capital—related to individuals in their general character, such as their accent, dispositions, and learning; 2) objectified cultural capital—related to the objects such as books, qualifications, or machines that one owns; and 3) institutional cultural capital—related to the institutions, such as places of learning, libraries, or universities that one attends.

In Bourdieu's theory, capital attracts capital and the various forms can be transformed or converted into one another. Furthermore, the value of the same capital in a different field would not be the same. Therefore, a specific type of capital may be highly valued in one field, yet have little to no value in another. For example, the more capital a student comes to college with that

is valued by the student's postsecondary education institution, the more opportunities are available to her at that college, and in turn, the less obstacles she will face as she persists as a student at that institution.

Furthermore, it is important to note that capital is spent or converted by an individual in accordance with her habitus. An individual's habitus determines the available set of options that seems viable for appropriating capital. Thus, the way in which one appropriates capital toward a particular end affords value to capital. For instance, an individual may possess capital that is highly valued in a particular field, yet he or she may not have the habitus to understand how to display or activate that capital to turn it into something meaningful for herself. For example, a highly qualified but shy individual on a graduate school entrance interview only spoke, and did so tersely, when answering questions that the interviewer asked of her. Thus, she did not come off as "professional" to the admissions officer and she was not offered entry to the program. In this case, the capital, or qualifications and credentials that the individual possessed effectively had no value for her.

Overview of the New Model

In the new model of student persistence, a student's habitus and the various forms of capital she possess, together with the fields she is involved in—including both community memberships internal to the college (such as university clubs, teams, programs and academic majors) and community memberships external to college (like family, friends, coworkers, and the local community one grew up in) that demand commitments (such as coursework, meetings, and practices for internal communities, and outside work, and family obligations for external communities)—constitute an overall perception that student has about herself. This perception of self in turn, influences the student's initial intentions, academic goals, and commitments in

addition to influencing how she approaches and interacts with the formal and informal academic and social spheres of her college. The formal and informal academic interactions she has at the college, together with the validating (or invalidating) experiences she has in these contexts constitutes the student's perception of the academic environment at the college. The student's perception of the social environment at the college is formed in a similar manner with the formal and informal interpersonal interactions and validating (or lack of validating) experiences forming this perception. Furthermore, the student's perceptions of the academic and social spheres of the college environment influence each other. Also influencing the student's perceptions of these environments are her intentions, goals and commitments.

Overall, the experiences that the student has in college influences her perception of fit, or sense of belonging at college in both the social and academic spheres of the college. The perception of fit in these two spheres also influence each other. Furthermore, as a result of these college experiences the student is changed. As previously described, this change is a result of environmental and sociological factors and it does not imply any kind of student development (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In accordance with Rendon's theory of validation, and also in accordance with a Bourdieuian framework, a student who experiences and interacts with a college institution is affected by these experiences so that the student's perceptions about herself are likely to have changed in some way. Thus, interactions in college modify the habitus of a student. These interactions may also equip a student with a gain (or loss) in capital, as well as affect her community memberships and commitments both internal and external to the college.

Next, with this change in outlook about herself the student's initial intentions, goals and commitments are likely to have been modified. These modified notions then influence her

decision-making about college. Possible decisions the student might make include: persisting toward her original goal, persisting toward a revised goal (such as changing majors, or limiting course load to part time), persisting in higher education but not at her current institution (such transferring schools, or attending a community college instead of a four-year school), and not persisting in any form of higher education (temporary stopout or permanent departure). Furthermore, given a decision to re-enroll in higher education in some capacity, the model loops and would loop continuously with each re-enrollment. This reflects how such decision-making about college is ongoing and occurs throughout a college student's career until graduation or until permanent departure.

Conclusion

The new multi-theoretical model of student persistence developed in this paper has advanced complexity, flexibility, and local applicability compared to previous models, and it highlights the interplay between structure and agency on both macro and micro levels. For these reasons, this new framework should provide fuller and more accurate explanations for understanding the experiences, decisions, and outcomes of low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students in postsecondary education. However, this model has yet to be tested empirically. This is the next step needed to further advance this theory and the related literature on student persistence and low-socioeconomic students in higher education.

Informed by the literature reviewed within and by the development of this new framework, it has become clear that the culture of postsecondary institutions and the culture of academia in general will have to become more flexible, supportive and accepting of students from low-income and less formally educated families for gaps in attainment between these

students and their more privileged peers to significantly diminish. Furthermore, research on student retention and persistence in higher education needs to inform scholars, practitioners and policymakers about not only why students from lower-socioeconomic groups depart from postsecondary education, but also about why and how students from these groups persist in higher education. Such knowledge will yield guidelines for the development of policies, programs and practices to enhance success for students from social class backgrounds that are traditionally marginalized in higher education. It is my hope that the model I have created within is a significant step toward reducing the gaps in college persistence and attainment between low-income, low-socioeconomic status, first-generation and working class students and their more privileged peers.

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