

EDITORIAL

Tinto in South Africa: Student integration, persistence and success, and the role of student affairs

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Prof. Vincent Tinto has been a most prolific and formative theorist in the domain of student affairs and has generated the most dominant sociological theory of student retention and student persistence. His most well-known and widely cited work is the 1975 research article “Dropout from Higher Education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research” which has inspired decades of research on student retention and success across the globe. Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997) developed a model of student attrition (or “dropout”) which explains student retention and success behaviour in relation to the university context. Tinto suggested that the degree to which a student is integrated into the academic and social life of the university, and the degree to which a student is committed to her or his studies and the goals of the university, are predictive of student persistence (Tinto, 1975; McCubbin, 2003). He thus sought to explain the intra-institutional impact on the student in terms of a “longitudinal model of institutional departure” based on an environmental input-process-output model (Tinto, 1993, p. 114).

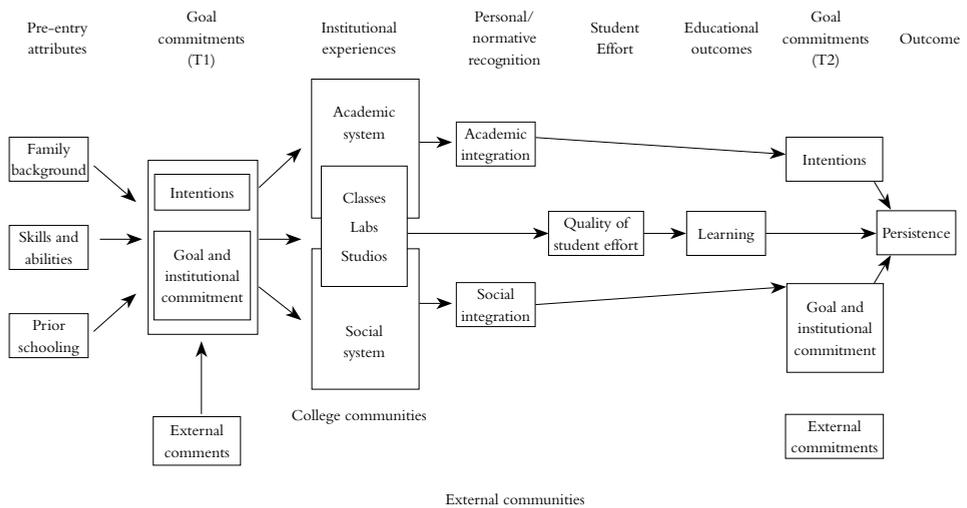
Tinto’s revised Student Integration Model (1997) links the pre-university entry attributes of a student (such as family background, skills and abilities, prior schooling) to the institutional experience and ultimately to educational outcomes, student retention and success. Key explanatory factors in Tinto’s revised model are the student’s intentions, goals and commitments; students’ institutional experiences linked to the academic and the social system; academic integration and social integration; and the quality of student effort and learning. Tinto described it as an “interactive model” of primarily “sociological” character (1993, p. 112). It is dynamic in so far as a student’s goals and intentions are continuously reshaped through interactions with the university and its academic and social structures (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1: Tinto's revised model of student attrition



Source: McCubbin (2003, p. 11)

Key to understanding Tinto's theory is his definition of integration as the alignment of students' attitudes and values with the social aspect of student life (especially peers), the academic life (faculty/staff), and the institutional goals of the university. As integration increases, so do the personal goals which link the student to the institution; conversely, negative experiences distance the student from the academic and social community of the institution and reduce commitment to shared goals (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Persistence is thus a function of integration into the academic and social aspects of the university system, mediated by goal commitments.

The hypothesis that academic and social integration explain dropout has received some criticism mainly based on its generalisability across a range of non-traditional students in higher education. Critiques have argued that social and academic integration do not act as reliable indicators for persistence rates among non-traditional students, such as distance learning students, mature students, returning students and minority students (whereby the latter refers to African-American students, as well as Native Americans, Asian-Americans and Latinos in some states of the United States) (McCubbin, 2003). Conversely, Tinto maintained that a complementary relationship exists between social integration and academic integration, which positively influences persistence and retention (Mannan, 2007). Despite its critics, according to McCubbin, Tinto's Student Integration Model remains "the most influential model of dropout from tertiary education" (2003, p. 1).

In the course of the last few years, student engagement has become the buzzword in higher education research internationally (Klemenčič, 2013). The most recent theoretical

developments on student persistence and student success have therefore centred on the construct of student engagement which, in turn, has drawn extensively on Tinto's theory of social and academic integration as well as the works of Tyler on time on task, quality of effort by Pace, and on Astin's theory of student involvement (Kuh, 2009a, p. 6). Student engagement is defined as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009b, p. 683). In addition to the relevance of Tinto's work for student engagement, efforts at identifying a set of high-impact practices of student success following insights from the large-scale engagement surveys of the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) have highlighted the significance of learning communities as noted in Tinto's work. He conceived learning communities as interdisciplinary peer groups that span the social and academic life contexts of students – from the curricular into the co-curriculum and thus, for example, into residences (Tinto, 1997, 1998). Furthermore, nuanced research areas have emerged with regard to styles of engagements, outcomes of engagements, and the short- and long-term effects of student engagement, focusing on surface and deep learning. Also, the discussion on student alienation related to student engagement have some scholars argue that indicators for student engagement on the one end of the continuum actually reflect as measures of alienation at the other end of the continuum (Case, 2007; Trowler, 2010).

At least since 2009, when the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) commissioned the development and pilot implementation of a South African version of NSSE, i.e. the SASSE, discussions have started on the theoretical foundations of student engagement and its usefulness for addressing matters of student throughput and academic success in an African context (Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Wawrzynski, Heck & Remly, 2012). Most recently, the student engagement construct has also shown promise to explain the attainment of graduate attributes linked to citizenship competences in studies conducted in South Africa and Uganda by the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA) (Luescher-Mamashela, 2014). Moreover, Tinto's work continues to offer more than what is explicitly studied today as student engagement. In many developing and emerging country contexts, where colonialism and apartheid, civil wars and political and socio-economic mismanagement have fragmented social structures over decades and deepened social cleavages, Tinto's notion of integration offers a crucial theoretical construct to think about student persistence and success in higher education. In our context, where many students come from families in which they are the first generation to participate in higher education, the notion of alignment between personal, social and academic goals and the influence of external communities thereon, offers a focal point for further research. Lastly, Tinto's seminal "communities of learning" concept has also began to shift debates in student affairs and teaching and learning in Africa, to refocus on the contextual impact as being highly influential on academic development and learning (Tinto, 1997, 1998). Tinto's work remains crucial within a context where the notion of "communities" often reflects

exclusive ethnic or racially conceived groupings and where therefore Tinto's concept of inclusive "learning communities" is an ideal rather than a practiced reality. Where universities are embedded in socially fragmented contexts like our own, it is essential that universities present opportunities for students to immerse themselves into a learning community that transcends boundaries of multiple definition: social or disciplinary.

It is for these reasons that the Editorial Executive of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* decided to dedicate its first anniversary issue to the work of Vincent Tinto and publish the transcripts of his four lectures which were given to higher education student affairs and teaching and learning professionals in South Africa in 2013. The four lectures provide an exceptionally accessible, contextually relevant entry into Tinto's work, respectively focusing on its theoretical underpinnings, key questions related to access and success as they arise in and out of the classroom and in institutional practices. The lecture transcripts have been edited by Vincent Tinto and approved by Tinto and the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which brought him to South Africa to deliver the lectures as part of its quality enhancement programme (see the article by Diane Grayson, in this issue). At the same time, the original video clips of Tinto's talks of August 2013 remain available from the CHE's website (www.che.ac.za). According to Grayson, since Tinto's CHE-sponsored tour, catchphrases like "access without success is not opportunity", and "student success does not arise by chance" have come to be part of the common vocabulary of student affairs and teaching and learning professionals in this context. Publishing Tinto's South Africa lectures is a way in which the JSAA seeks to contribute to continue the conversation and make Tinto's work available to student affairs professionals, academics and students across the African continent.

In addition to this introduction, Tinto's lectures are framed by two reflective contributions solicited specifically to contextualise and critically appraise the lectures. The first is published as a preface to this issue written by the CHE's Director of Institutional Audits, Prof. Diane Grayson, who was instrumental in conceptualising the Tinto tour of 2013 as part of the Council's quality enhancement project. The second is a paper of both personal and critical reflection on Tinto's South Africa lectures by Prof. Laura Perna, University of Pennsylvania. Added to the issue is a listing of selected publications of Vincent Tinto, spanning 40 years of scholarship, which will hopefully stimulate further reading.

The campus dialogue section in this issue publishes a report on yet another historic development in the student affairs profession in Africa: the establishment of the Southern African Federation of Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS). It is authored by Dr Saloschini Pillay, SAFSAS inaugural President.

Two book reviews are included in this issue. Munyaradzi Madambi reviews the recently published book *Perspectives on Student Affairs in South Africa* edited by McGlory Speckman and Martin Mandew and published by African Minds in 2014. In Madambi's estimation, the book provides "a comprehensive exposé of the broad scope of how universities can create, facilitate and advance opportunities for student growth and success" (Madambi, in this issue). The second review, by Randall Lange, is meant to entice readers to tackle what is undoubtedly "one of the most authoritative and most cited publications in student

affairs”, providing an indispensable theoretical and practical background to the work of student affairs practitioners and academics alike. The seminal second issue (2005) of *How College Affects Students* by Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini is the first in a series of ‘classics’ in student affairs literature with which the JSAA hopes to further contribute to building a theoretical foundation for student affairs in Africa.

Finally, as a peer-reviewed academic journal, all research articles and reflective practice articles published in the JSAA undergo a strict process of quality assurance, including an initial screening of manuscripts by two or more members of the Editorial Executive which is followed by a process of double-blind peer review. At the point of receiving a submission, the initial vetting process is considered as developmental and the practice of the editors has been to provide formative feedback to authors to encourage them to improve a manuscript, if necessary. Once a manuscript has successfully passed the vetting process, it is anonymised and sent for peer review to at least two reviewers with proven scholarly and/or professional expertise relevant to the subject matter of the manuscript. The suitability of articles is evaluated in terms of five criteria: originality; significance; scholarship; scope and interest; and accessibility. Review reports are then discussed in detail in the Editorial Executive and the recommendations of reviewers are followed in accordance with our review policy. The present issue is in this regard extraordinary. Given their nature, Tinto’s lectures were not blind peer-reviewed; rather, the transcripts were vetted and edited by the editors, edited and approved by Tinto, and eventually critical reflections on the lecture transcripts were solicited from experts, parts of which are published alongside Tinto’s work in this issue. This arrangement for this special issue is, however, not to detract from our editorial and peer review policy and rigorous practice designed specifically to adhere to the *ASSAf National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals*. In this regard we are proud to announce that the JSAA’s commitment to following best practice in open access publishing has been recognised recently with the Journal’s inclusion in the international Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). The DOAJ includes only “open access scientific and scholarly journals that use a quality control system to guarantee the content” (DOAJ, 2014).

This issue completes the second volume of the JSAA. We would therefore like to thank on behalf of the Editorial Executive the many peer reviewers who have supported the Journal over 2013 and 2014 by availing their expertise, time and dedication for evaluating the suitability of manuscripts. Reviewers are an indispensable part of the scholarly publication process; it is only with their expertise that we can hope to attain the aim of making the JSAA the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain and an essential resource for the university leadership, student affairs professionals, institutional researchers and academics and students focused on the field of higher education studies and student affairs in Africa.

On behalf of the Editorial Executive,
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