

## **Reflections on Student Retention Theory**

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Good morning. It is a pleasure to join today and an honor to have been asked to speak about an issue that concerns both our countries, namely the need to increase the proportion of our students who complete their university degrees and do so in a timely fashion. In the United State it is an issue that has long been focus not only of theory and research, but also of national, state, and institutional policies. This is especially true during the last several years as many of our states have moved to funding models that hold institutions financially accountable for their ability to graduate more of their students. Now more than ever universities want to know what they can do improve student retention and speed their progress to degree completion.

Because a grounded understanding of the process of retention is so important to the development of effective practice, I want to speak today about current student retention theory; its origins and modifications over the last several decades, and some of the changes that are needed to better address the issues that now confront us.

To do so I need to take us on a brief tour of the development of current student retention theory, one that had its start with my early writings. To understand that early work, it is important to understand the intellectual, social and political climate in which it developed, namely the student protests in the 1960s and 70's in the

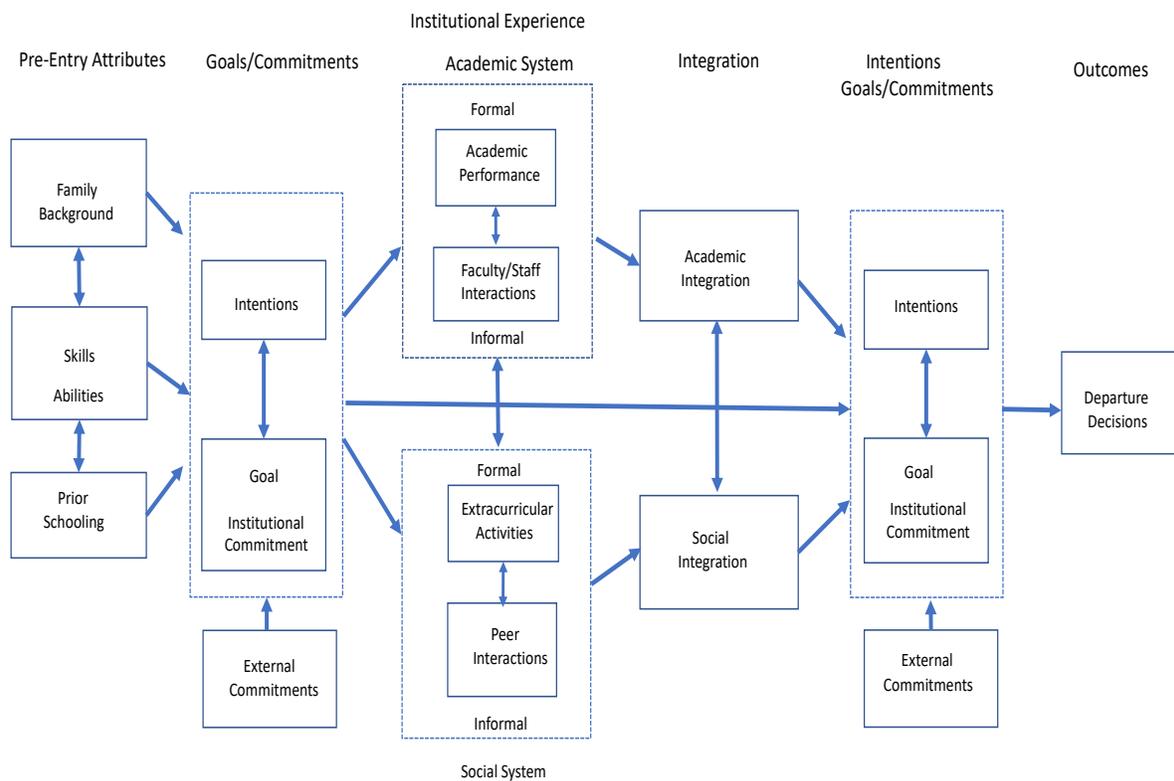
United States that sought to shed light on the role of existing social, political, and economic structures in perpetuating economic, gender and racial inequality in American society. As regards inequality in student retention, much of the literature at that time that claimed to explain what was then called “dropout” tended to blame the victim, namely that dropout was primarily the reflection of the attributes of those who drop out. My own experience, having been a dropout myself and coming from a low-income immigrant family, told me that view was too simplistic, if not elitist. That at least partial if not primary blame had to be assigned to the universities in which students were enrolled that acted in ways, perhaps unintentionally, to produce the very dropout about which they often complained. Consequently I sought to find a way of explaining dropout by linking students’ actions to the actions of the institutions in which they were enrolled.

Though there are several ways to do so, my studies in sociology at The University of Chicago and my personal experiences in the Peace Corps and the student protest communities of the late 60’s and early 70’s led me to look for a way of connecting the role of community to student retention. As fate would have it, I was a participant in an advanced doctoral seminar in which one doctoral student spoke of the work of Emile Durkheim, the first Chair of Sociology at the Sorbonne, and his theory of suicide that stressed the role of personal integration into intellectual and social communities in individual suicide. Immediately I found a connection between my interest in the role of community and student behavior and a framework for a model of student retention. But let me be clear. I do not think dropout is akin to suicide. I am still here. Rather my use of Durkheim’s theory of suicide provided a way of understanding how student experiences in the academic and social

communities of the university shape academic and social integration and in turn decisions to stay or leave. At the same time, his work enabled me to construct a way of understanding the process of student retention that had clear implications for university practice, a particular concern of mine. The result was a theory of student retention that was first described in my book *Leaving College*.

That work and the work of others at that time, most notably Astin, Kuh, Pascarella and Terenzini, served as the foundation for a theory that has guided years of research on student retention and the development of survey questionnaires to assess the role of engagement in retention. More importantly it has proved instrumental in the development of a range of programs to enhance student engagement and promote student integration in the hopes of increasing retention and completion.

As shown in the next slide, this theory argues that student decisions to persist are shaped not only by their attributes, backgrounds, goals and early institutional commitment, but also by their experiences in the formal and informal academic and social communities of the university. These experiences shape students' academic and social integration and influence, in turn, their resulting intentions, goals, and institutional commitment. Positive experiences lead to heightened commitment to the institution and subsequent decisions to persist. Negative experiences lead to the opposite.



Student experiences, or what researchers now call engagements, are not only a function of student attributes but also the character of the academic and social communities of the university in which they enroll. Universities influence decisions to persist as much, if not more, as students do.

Since that early beginning a number of modifications have been made that has improved student retention theory. In addition to the inclusion of the impact of finances and external forces, such as family and work, that may pull students away from persistence regardless of their experiences, more recent theory has recognized the importance of students perceptions and the centrality of the classroom to student success.

As regards student perceptions, though conversations about retention has often centered on the importance of engagement to retention, it became clear that what matters is not engagement per se, though clearly it must, but the meaning students derive from their engagements with other students, teachers, and staff as to their membership in the communities of the university. These are shaped not only by individual attributes, but also by institutional values and campus culture. To repeat, the underlying dynamic of student success is based not so much on engagements as it how student's engagements with others on campus lead them to perceive themselves as valued members of a community that has academic and social dimensions; that they matter and belong. That perception generates, in turn, a commitment on the part of student to the institution. It is that commitment drawn from student perception of engagements that provides a causal link between engagement, integration, and commitment first described in my early work.

It should be pointed out that student perceptions of engagement and their mattering and belonging within the university can vary greatly reflecting differences not only in student backgrounds and prior experiences, but also in the value-laden situations students encounter on campus. Universities are rarely homogeneous. They typically consist of multiple academic and social communities that may have quite differ value orientations and embedded cultures. It is entirely possible for students to feel they matter and belong in one setting but not in another. But to the degree that a university has a dominant culture, so too does its actions as a university shape student behavior.

In your universities, however, the appropriate frame of reference may be the individual Faculty rather than the University generally.

I should note that one of the consequences of the recognition of the importance of student perceptions, and I must add a welcomed change, is the increased use of qualitative methods in the study of student retention. Though existing surveys like NSSE or its several derivatives now being used in a number of countries may be useful, they typically focus on behavioral measures of engagement, not the perceptions students derive from their engagement. Consequently while they may be able to tell us, in aggregate, about patterns of engagement and their possible relationship to changes in university rates of retention over time, they give us little hint as to why those patterns exist or how they come to be associated with retention.

A second change that has occurred, for which I am in some measure responsible, reflects not so much a change in our understanding of the dynamics of student retention as much as it applies in the real world of university life. This change is the recognition of the importance of the classroom to student success, especially during the critical first year of university. The classroom is, for most students, the primary if not only place where academic and social engagement occurs. If engagement does not occur in those places of learning, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere. In a very real sense the classroom should be seen as a smaller community within the university whose attributes, values, and climate shape student academic and social membership in the classroom and beyond in ways that have direct bearing not only on students retention but also on student learning.

Consequently any meaningful theory of student retention, one that can influence university practice, must include the classroom and student academic and social experiences in the classroom.

To the degree that classrooms are the primary grounds upon which student learning and persistence is built, it follows that the actions of those who teach; adjuncts, lecturers, and professors, are critical to student learning and completion. Any reasonable theory of student retention must also include their actions.

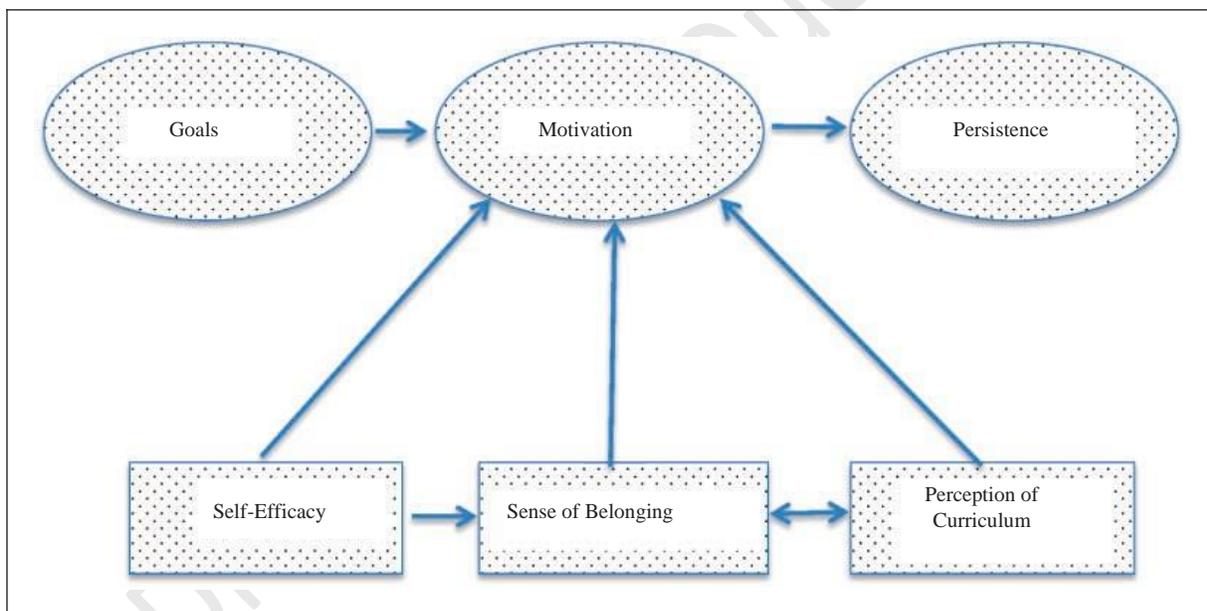
Let me now turn to several modifications I view as necessary to improve retention theory and their impact of policy and practice.

The most important is the need to change the lens through which we view student retention. For too long we have taken on the lens of the university and ask, as they do, what can be done to retain students. But when one speaks to students, looks at the issue of retention from their perspective, sees the university through their eyes, one does not hear students speak of being retained. Rather they speak of persisting even if it may mean transferring to another program or university. The difference in these perspectives is not trivial. Indeed, it lies at the heart of our ability to not only develop a more meaningful theory of student retention, but also to enhance the university's ability to further increase retention and completion. 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. Motivation is, in turn, shaped by a variety of issues not the least of which reflect the character of student experiences within the university.

As seen in the next slide, it is argued that student experiences influence motivation through their impact on their goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived worth or relevance of the curriculum.



As regards student goals, though it is evident that having the goal of completing university is necessary condition for completion, it is not a sufficient condition. This is the case because events during college can influence students' goals. Not all students' goals are strongly held. Though they may be committed to the goal of completion or to a particular field of study, their commitment may be weak. Even

the smallest difficulty can lead them to leave or change programs. At the same time, not all students are certain as to their goal or to the field in which they first enroll. Early experiences in the university may lead them to change their minds. In the United States, for instance, more than a third of students who begin university are undecided about their field of study or uncertain of the correctness of their choice. Not surprisingly many change majors before completing their studies and consequently extend their time to degree completion.

Students may also differ in their motivations for attending university. Some may be more concerned with the intrinsic benefits of university such as learning, affiliation, development and autonomy, while others more concerned with the perceived extrinsic benefits such as income, occupation, and further education. For some the earning of a degree may be seen as a necessary evil and exert only the minimum effort required to do so. While such differences matter as they can influence how students respond to their experiences, so too can experiences in the university lead students to change their goals.

Given goals, student motivation to persist is shaped by their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is typically defined as a person's belief in their ability to succeed at a specific task or in a specific situation - a type of expectation about oneself. It is one manifestation of how individuals come to perceive themselves from past experiences and interaction with others and their capacity to have some degree of control over their environment. Self-efficacy is learned, not inherited. It is not generalizable in that it applies equally to all tasks and situations, but is task and

situation specific. Believing one can succeed in one task does not imply that one believes in the likelihood of success at a different task.

In the university, self-efficacy is learned through the daily experiences students have with other students, teachers, and staff, and the expectations that are conveyed in their behavior. Such expectations, in particular in the classroom, have been shown to impact student performance. As has often been observed, no one rises to low expectations. Perhaps this video clip will make this clear.

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Sense of self-efficacy influences, in turn, how a person addresses goals, tasks, and challenges. A strong sense of self-efficacy promotes goal attainment. Persons with high self-efficacy will engage more readily in a task, expend more effort and persist longer in the completion of that task and do so even when they encounter difficulties. Conversely, a weak sense of self-efficacy tends to undermine achievement. As such, self-efficacy is the foundation upon which student persistence is built. Students have to believe or come to believe they can succeed in college. Otherwise there is little reason to continue to expend the effort to do so.

The good news is that self-efficacy is not fixed. It is malleable and can be influenced by student experience and by university practice - especially during the first year of university. The fact is that while many students begin confident in their ability to succeed, more than a few do not. But even those who begin confident in their

ability can encounter challenges that serve to weaken their sense of self-efficacy. This is particularly true during the 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

None of the above should be taken to suggest that student academic ability does not matter. It does. Rather it argues that without a belief in one's ability to succeed, even students with the ability to do so may struggle and become discouraged. Conversely, even a strong belief in one's ability to succeed at a particular task does not ensure success in that task if the student does not possess the academic skills required to do so.

While believing one can succeed at university is essential for persistence, 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, that they matter and belong. The result is the development of a sense of belonging that generates, in turn, a commitment on the part of students to the institution that serves to bind them to the group or community even when challenges arise. That commitment drive student motivation to persist. Students who perceive themselves as belonging and mattering 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. As importantly, feeling one does not belong in the classroom or program can lead to withdrawal from learning activities that undermines not only the motivation to persist but also the motivation to learn. Both undermine academic performance.

Regardless of how universities act to enhance student sense of belonging, they 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 the first-year, especially in the classroom of that year, facilitates other forms of engagement that enhance student learning in that year and persistence to completion in the years that follow.

Finally, student motivation is also influenced by their perceptions of the value or relevance of their studies. Though what constitutes value or relevance 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 to warrant their time and effort. Only then will students be motivated to engage with that material in ways that promote learning and, in turn, persistence. Courses and teaching practices that are seen as irrelevant, unhelpful, or of low quality will often yield the opposite result. Even if they persist, they will become disinterested and put in only the minimum effort required to pass the course.

Student perceptions of the quality and relevance of the curriculum and its manner of being taught 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 but also the perspectives that are deemed appropriate to the analysis of those facts.

Student perceptions may apply to the curriculum generally or more commonly to specific courses within the curriculum. Student who show little effort in one course, may be highly motivated to learn in another. Content and pedagogical practices matter. In this regard let me observe that sometimes the fault lies with those who teach the course who fail to help students understand why the content of the course is relevant to a meaningful topic or problem that may interest them. Too often it is left to the students to discover. In other cases, excessive work demands may force even the most motivated students to adopt strategies to help them get by that reduce effort.

I should point out enhanced motivation leads not only to persistence but also student willingness to spend more time of their studies. Read here a quote of a student who participated in a course that employed problem-based learning that required students to work cooperatively within groups to solve an assigned problem.

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While I well understand that young people have many things that interest them - need I say more - it does not follow that universities cannot construct campus environments, especially in the classroom, that promote greater student study effort. They can and they should.

Another modification that would improve student retention theory begins with the recognition that student persistence is a journey of becoming that occurs over time during which students have to acquire increasing levels of knowledge and skill appropriate to their field of study. In the critical first year of university, it is a journey of becoming that calls for students to acquire the knowledge, skills and habits of mind that provide the foundation for success in that year and the years that follow. Yet in its present form, student retention theory does not tell us how that process varies over the student lifecycle. While our theories purport to be longitudinal, they typically assume, if only by default, that the forces shaping retention in the first year are the same in the years that follow. Yet we know from experience that this is not the case. But we have yet to tap that experience in any rigorous way to extend our current understanding of the longitudinal process of student retention.

Here, for instance, is where existing theories of student intellectual and social development can help for they provide a way of understanding how students change over time and in turn the sorts of actions that are likely to support their development and retention over time.

Another modification to current theory would require us to think of universities as overlapping and interlocking networks of academic and social communities that connect people and offices to one another. Analysis of student engagement in such networks would reveal not only the quantity and quality of engagements but also with whom those engagements occur. Knowledge of how those patterns of engagement vary among successful and unsuccessful students would, in turn, allow us to identify not only important networks that are associated with student success but also particular people and offices who are. As classrooms sit at the crossroads of multiple social and academic networks, it would also allow us to understand how experiences in one classroom may have multiple effects in others. My own studies of networks in the diffusion of innovation lead me to think that network analysis may also allow us to understand how innovations in teaching can spread beyond one classroom to others.

Finally we have to cross disciplinary borders to gain insights into the forces that shape student retention and completion that are not available from the lenses of individual disciplines such as psychology, economics, and sociology. Our theories must be interdisciplinary in nature. The inclusion of a social-psychology frame to our theories, as I sought to do with my recent writings on student motivation, student development theory noted earlier, and social geography and network analysis, are but a few possibilities. There are no doubt numerous other possibilities but I will leave that to more agile minds than mine.

In closing let me observe that good theory and good practice go hand in hand. Without a grounded understanding of the process of student retention and completion to guide institutional action, substantial improvement in rates of student success are very difficult to achieve. At the same time, good theory is informed by good practice. It does not develop in a vacuum but emerges from a distillation of experience that provides a deeper understanding of retention in ways that no particular experience can. There is still much to learn and more to do in our pursuit of enhanced student retention and completion. Our journey is far from complete.

Thank you.

Draft: Not for Quotation