Inverse Relationship: Social Integration and Persistence in an Introductory Psychology Course for Secondary Students

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ABSTRACT

The researchers investigated the relationship between social integration and persistence for high school students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. The researchers hypothesized that the social system interfered with the academic mission of the high school in this study. Persistence was operationalized as completion of an introductory psychology course with a grade of D or higher. Participants were 241 high school students in the southeastern United States. In support of the researchers' initial expectations, students scoring higher on social integration were more likely to dropout. Based on the results of this investigation, secondary teachers should take a more active role in promoting interactions with their students. By employing a more collaborative learning environment, students may become more involved socially and academically. This could subsequently aid in reducing the high rate of attrition.

Keywords: social integration, persistence, high school retention

AN INVERSE RELATIONSHIP: SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND PERSISTENCE IN AN INTRODUCTORY PSYCHOLOGY COURSE FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

For many years, high schools have offered electives such as introductory psychology. Unfortunately these psychology courses experience both high demand and high attrition. Classes often close before the end of the first week of registration, months before the semester begins, yet attrition is approximately 45% per semester. The problem is that only a fraction of the potential students are allowed to enroll and of them only a portion finish.

Action researchers have conducted studies on persistence using Tinto's theory to better understand and use findings regarding the departure and persistence behavior of their students. Tinto's theory is posited on how the individual integrates to the social and academic climate of the institution. The model theorizes that individuals enter an educational institution

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with varying background attributes and experiences, as well as varying personal education achievement expectations (commitments). As members of the educational community, students interact with the high school environment, which is comprised of two primary systems: the academic system and the social system. The academic system refers to those aspects of the environment that contribute explicitly to the fulfillment of educational objectives. The social system refers to the ways in which opportunities for interaction among members are organized and clustered within the institution.

The primary objective of this research was to explore the effects of social integration on persistence in a high school introductory psychology course. Because the two systems (academic and social) are interdependent, the researchers hypothesized that the social system interferes with the academic system in terms of the mission of the high school who participated in this research. This hypothesis was developed in collaboration with the school's academic counselors. These counselors reported that non-persisters would attribute their course departure to social activities which interfered with their academic obligations. Persistence was operationalized as successful completion of introductory psychology with a grade of D or higher.

METHOD

Participants
The participants were 241 high school students enrolled in introductory psychology classes and attending a high school in the southeastern United States. The student population was ethnically diverse, being comprised of 25% White, 25% Asian, 15% Latino, 10% Black, and 25% students identifying themselves as "Other"; slightly over one-half of the participants were female (55%).

Measurement and Instrumentation
The most frequently used instrument for assessing integration was developed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980). They employed 34 Likert items pertinent to the model. Following factor analysis, five factors were identified: (1) peer group interactions (seven items); (2) interactions with faculty (five items); (3) faculty concern for student development and teaching (five items); (4) academic and intellectual development (seven items); and (5) institutional and goal commitment (five items). Factor scale scores were computed by summing raw item response codes. Alpha reliabilities for these scales ranged from .71 to .84. The integration variable set is comprised of the following: social integration, which is the sum of scores on the peer group relations, and the informal relationships with faculty scales. Academic integration is the sum of scores on the academic and intellectual development, faculty concern for teaching, and the student development scales. Assessment of commitment, social integration, and academic integration levels was accomplished with the Student Integration Scale (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Participants indicated their degrees of agreement or disagreement using a five-point Likert-type scale.

Procedure
During second week of the semester, participants completed the Institutional and Goal Commitment subscale by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980). At mid-semester, remaining four subscales: peer group relations, informal relationships with teachers, academic and intellectual development were completed. Mid-semester was chosen because varying individual levels of academic and social integration were likely to have been established by then.

RESULTS
At the end of the semester 181 (74.7%) participants persisted while 60 (25.3%) had dropped out. A standard logistic regression estimated the effects of minority status, gender, high school

grade point average, commitment, academic integration, and social integration on persistence (completed vs. dropped out). The Wald statistic was used to test the significance of each predictor variable. The researchers had initially hypothesized that social integration was associated with attrition. In support of this initial expectation, students scoring higher on social integration were more likely to drop out.

DISCUSSION

Given the negative effects of social integration found in this study, it is recommended that teachers take a more active role in promoting interactions with their students. High schools should consider structuring their educational programs in alternative ways that underscore the importance of academic and social community. By employing a more collaborative learning atmosphere, students could be more socially and academically involved in high school elective courses, which could subsequently aid in reducing the high rate of attrition in such courses.

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