

# **Literature Review:**

## **Theories on Student Attrition**

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Since the early 1970s theorists have pondered the causes of college dropout. Generally referred to as “student attrition,” this problem has spurred numerous causal theories and theoretical models. Vincent Tinto led the research with his revolutionary 1973 study, which he later revised (1987) amid criticism from other luminaries in the field, most notably Bean, Astin, Terenzini, and Pascarella. It is on the work of these scholars (including also Tinto) that all modern research in the student attrition field is based. I found and will review in brief some of the extensive research from Tinto to the present, including the basic criticisms therein. I will further explain the steps some colleges are currently taking to counteract this increasingly important issue.

Little or no research was conducted on student attrition prior to Tinto, and every piece of research I found contained several references to him and his work. Ishitani and DesJardins claim that the majority of research on the subject has been based on Tinto’s model (7), as does Metz in his research review (4). Metz, however, goes on to assert that Tinto’s main source was a certain *Rites of Passage*, by Arnold van Gennep. Focusing on the anthropological perspective of human “rites of passage,” van Gennep’s study elucidates the basic human nature behind much of the college experience. Tinto primarily utilizes the chapter entitled “Initiation Rites” in his model, a chapter in which van

Genep claims “that physiological puberty and ‘social puberty’ are essentially different” (Genep 65). Tinto sees the transition from high school to college as a form of this “social puberty.” Tinto further argues that the maturation process is “marked by three distinct phases or stages, each with its own specialized ceremonies and rituals...[e]ach serv[ing] to move individuals from youthful participation to full adult membership in society” (Tinto 92). College, according to van Genep and Tinto therefore, is simply part of this sociological maturation process.

Tinto’s original theory involved five specific factors that contributed to student retention: (1) a student’s pre-entry attributes (prior schooling and family background); (2) goals and commitment (the student’s individual aspirations in the institution); (3) experience at the institution (academics and faculty and peer interactions); (4) external commitments while at the institution; (5) integration both academically and socially (Metz 4). In the second edition of his book, Tinto argues against models of attrition that “see student departure as reflecting some shortcoming and/or weakness in the individual” (85), further reinforcing the fifth aspect of his attrition model: the subjective category of integration. In essence, Tinto is arguing that a student may be passing classes with flying colors and still decide to drop out for reasons unrelated to “shortcoming and/or weakness.” He suggests that the act of dropping out should not necessarily carry a negative connotation.

This first theory has, of course, since been criticized and manipulated to fit later theories in the collective effort to create a single unifying attrition model. In his “involvement theory,” Astin suggested that “certain variables influence student persistence, notably various forms of financial aid,” and that “students learn by becoming

involved” in college-sponsored activities (Metz 5). Although Tinto certainly includes the latter in his theory, he clearly ignores the former argument of Astin.

John Bean further “expanded on the previous work of Tinto and Astin by integrating academic variables, student intent, goals, expectations, and external and internal environmental factors into a revised model of persistence” (Metz 8). Bean criticizes Tinto for not citing “similarities between leaving the world of work and leaving college,” suggesting reasons might be similar between the two (Metz 8). Bean’s attrition model includes another set of five facets: (1) routinization – the idea that student life becomes routine; (2) instrumental communication – how well an institution distributes information about student life; (3) participation in classroom decisions; (4) integration; (5) distributive justice – whether rewards are consistent with effort expended (Ishitani and DesJardins, 6-7). Both Metz and Ishitani and DesJardins agree that “[m]ost researchers have used one of these models [Tinto or Bean] to explain student departure” (7).

Scholars have continued to criticize other aspects of Tinto’s theory. Tierney argues against Tinto’s reliance on a traditional age for college students, which ignores a large number of older, returning students (Metz 9). Others have argued against the theory for its ignorance of the two-year college, and its failure to take into account the differing circumstances of minority students.

Ishitani and DesJardins bring a more compelling criticism in their five-year study of student attrition. While Tinto’s model assumes that the various forces on the student remain constant throughout the college experience, Ishitani and DesJardins argue that these forces vary from year to year. Dividing the student group into different subsets

based on family income, SAT scores, gender, race, and subsequently first year GPA, their study yielded interesting results. While most of the results were expected (higher income, GPA, and SAT scores equated with higher likelihood of retention), a few varied from year to year. For example, “the provision of financial aid in year-three substantially reduces dropout behavior relative to the non-receipt of aid” (Ishitani and DesJardins 22). Another unexpected result was that first-year students who met with faculty out of the classroom were 25% more likely to drop out than those who did not interact with faculty (Ishitani and DesJardins 20). Clearly, then, the significance of this experiment is to prove that Tinto’s theory is fundamentally flawed, as dropout variables change from year to year.

All of this is to say that students and scholars still await a single, unifying theory of attrition. In the absence of it, colleges are now attempting new strategies by adding incentives for student retention. Southwest Texas State University has implemented “learning communities” designed to engage freshman in school activities and thus help them with the integration process that has been pointed out by Tinto and Bean, among others, as imperative to retention (Reisberg 2). Other institutions have introduced a tuition credit for students who stay enrolled for a certain amount of time (Reisberg 3). Minnesota State University-Mankato created cluster courses designed to help students bond with each other during the first year away from home, and the university saw its retention rate increase 10% in the first five years of the program (Reisberg 4). Colleges such as these utilize the various attrition theories in an effort to identify those students who are dropout risks in the first years, and they are the reason that past and future research remains important.

Student attrition research has certainly come a long way since Vincent Tinto. His theories still form the foundation for all modern scholarship. The various criticisms of subsequent scholars have only served to make this foundation stronger and further evolved. Colleges today have more resources for improving student retention than ever before; and with continued research and study, they will continue to insure the spread of higher education.

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[Contents](#)

[Occasions Home](#)

[PWR Home](#)