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A Comprehensive First Year Engagement Theory

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ABSTRACT

Several student retention theorists have purported unique models to support First Year Engagement theory. The scholarly contributions of Vincent Tinto (1993), Alexander Astin (1984), and Carol Goodenow (1993) inform much of the literature. Astin (1984) provided an extensive foundation of knowledge of the factors that contribute to academic and social engagement. Similarly, Tinto's (1993) research addresses the role of student engagement in relation to student persistence and Goodenow (1993) discusses how a sense of belonging contributes to student success. However, with all this knowledge, first year experience programs are not consistently achieving desirable results and colleges and universities struggle to retain admitted students. This proposal utilizes the existing theoretical underpinnings connected to first year experience to reveal the need for a more robust examination of the first year experience and deeper investigation of factors that support and thwart student success and persistence and ultimately propose the first comprehensive first year engagement theory.

Keywords: Student retention theory, higher education, persistence, first year experience, first year engagement theory

A Comprehensive First Year Engagement Theory

In 1962, Nevitt Sanford, a professor of psychology at Stanford University wrote *The American College*, a text that dealt with the challenges students experienced during their first year of college. His belief asserted that first-year students need to be challenged and engaged with experiences that fostered learning and personal development in order for them to persist. Sanford (1962) believed that first-year students needed to be engulfed in a positive campus climate and perceive that they were supported by the campus community. The work of critical retention theorists shaped the notion that academic engagement, sense of belonging and social support are all crucial parts of the first year experience (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993).

Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement stemmed from his longitudinal investigations of the factors that contributed to student persistence. Astin's (1984, 1985) Student Involvement Theory concluded that the factors important to college student development were synonymous to the factors important to college student attrition. Simply put, increasing students' level of involvement in an institution was directly linked to student development and success. Whereas, involvement was defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984,

p. 297)-Astin (1984) viewed the phenomenon of student persistence from a behavioral perspective.

Tinto's Student Integration

Tinto's theory claimed that students were more likely to remain in an institution and persist if they connected socially and academically while at that institution. Students who integrated into the campus community by making friends, joining student clubs and/or organizations, or engaging in academic activities were more likely to persist than those students who did not have these type of meaningful connections. Students - who did not feel at home in an institution or believed that there was no place for them at that institution - struggled with institutional fit and were unlikely to persist (Tinto, 1993). Similarly, students who isolated themselves by remaining in dormitories away from social aspects of college life fell into a similar category. Tinto (1993) stated that both incongruence and isolation inhibited the integration process, thereby inhibiting persistence. Tinto also pointed out that student integration into an institution can occur along two dimensions, the academic and the social.

Goodenow's Sense of Belonging

Goodenow (1993) proposed that a sense of belonging at school reflects ...'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment' (p. 80). According to Goodenow, without a sense of belonging, students are more prone to feelings of social isolation, alienation, and loneliness – which are often the reasons why students are not retained. On the other hand, proper, adequate, and timely satisfaction of the sense of belonging leads to physical, emotional, behavioral, and mental well-being (Maslow, 1968). Moreover, the feeling of belonging may have a direct and powerful influence on students' motivation (Goodenow, 1993).

Theory of First Year Engagement

The theories of Astin, Tinto and Goodenow collectively increase a student's sense of belonging and motivation and forge "meaningful connections" on campus. As students experience successful integration, both academically and socially, at their institution through a commitment to interact and engage, inside and outside of the classroom, the result will be a greater sense of connectedness and belonging to the institution. Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life of the college, fully engaging in all things academic, while social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom that are meaningful. These two concepts interact with and enhance one another, collectively enhancing the likelihood that a student would persist at an institution. And, while students must be integrated into the institution along both dimensions to increase their likelihood of persistence, there needs to be a fine balance between the two (Tinto, 1993). Student integration and belonging complement one another.

Smith: A Comprehensive First Year Engagement Theory

The framework for a new comprehensive theory of first year engagement is based upon the work of Vincent Tinto (1993), Alexander Astin (1984), and Carol Goodenow (1993). Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, Astin's Theory of Student Involvement, and Goodenow's Theory of Belonging collectively speak to the factors that impact student success. The author established an integrated theoretical framework (see figure 1.0) by integrating each of these theories. Collectively, the combination of the student belonging, integration and involvement may shape and illuminate the first year college experience in higher education.

FIGURE 1.0

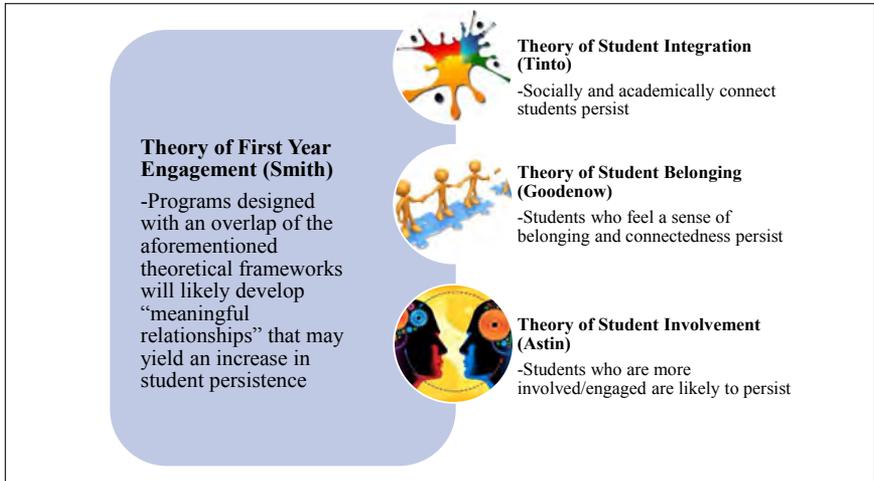


Figure 1.0 Comprehensive First Year Engagement Theory

First Year Experience programs could design effective programs that employ the theoretical framework proposed through the theory of First Year Engagement.

A First Year Experience Model

Smith (2016) proposes the First Year Engagement Theory which states that co-occurrence of Tinto, Astin and Goodenow's theories on student retention and success, enhances the likelihood that first year students will develop meaningful connections at an institution and be more likely to persist to and through completion. It is believed that in order for social and academic integration at an institution to occur, students must feel a sense of belonging. Astin's Student Involvement Theory, Tinto's Student Integration Theory and Goodenow's Theory of Belonging collectively speak to the factors that impact student success. Consistent with Townsend's (2006) notion of social involvement, social involvement has a huge positive impact on student retention similar to those who participated in the FYE program included in this chapter.

The First Year Engagement Theory is relevant to student success through the proper design of the first year experience. It is imperative that key design components are included in program designs to ensure a successful first year

experience program. Smith (2016) proposes five components gathered from a host of successful FYE programs that may serve to be useful in future program design. Design a program that:

Allows the students the opportunity to take credit bearing courses during the summer,

Maintains a consistent program format throughout entire first year,

Incorporates a formal early warning alert system i.e. alerts prior to week 6 of a fifteen week semester,

Implement intentional first year scheduling that includes major courses, required developmental education courses, and appropriate credit load,

Recruit faculty and staff who are committed to student success and who can serve in a mentor capacity.

Palmer, Wood et al (2014) has explored student success in higher education and indicated that there is a benefit to: having knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings that help to increase student retention, and to being well versed in first year experience programs designed specifically to assist underprepared and underrepresented students in their persistence on college campuses.

In summary, it was found that student participation in FYE programs do have an overall positive impact on academic success during the first year of college. It was discovered that early social integration into the campus community, establishing sound mentor relationships and having a strong sense of belonging all play a key role in student persistence from year one to year two.

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Biography

Dr. Craig Smith holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology. He earned his Master's in Education with a concentration in Curriculum and Instruction and a Doctor of Education from Drexel University. Dr. Smith has been a leader in the arena of social justice. He has fifteen years of experience in education.