



The first semester experiences of American Indian transfer students
by Cindy Ann Dell

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
Education

Montana State University

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Abstract:

American Indian College students have lower persistence rates than all other minority groups. A qualitative study was conducted to better understand the experiences of seven American Indian students as they transferred from a Montana tribal college to a Montana university. The goal was to understand how their experiences related to persistence factors, including background characteristics, academic integration, social integration, environmental pull, organizational variables and attitudes. Personal determination appeared to be an important component related to background characteristics. It was also found that students who acquired effective study and learning strategies performed better academically and developed positive attitudes about themselves and their continued enrollment. Social integration was less important, since they depended upon their families for social, emotional and financial support. Environment pull was a factor for the participants, but all persisted regardless of the difficulties they experienced. It appeared that students experienced a four-part adjustment to the transfer, including (a) Expectations and Apprehension, (b) Acclimation, (c) Reality, and (d) Adjustment vs. Discouragement. It was concluded that first semester experiences were important for persistence, but that a longitudinal study should be conducted to understand implications of attitudinal development toward the University, which ultimately leads to the decision to depart or remain. A quantitative approach to determine the validity of adjustment phases should also be conducted.

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ABSTRACT

American Indian College students have lower persistence rates than all other minority groups. A qualitative study was conducted to better understand the experiences of seven American Indian students as they transferred from a Montana tribal college to a Montana university. The goal was to understand how their experiences related to persistence factors, including background characteristics, academic integration, social integration, environmental pull, organizational variables and attitudes. Personal determination appeared to be an important component related to background characteristics. It was also found that students who acquired effective study and learning strategies performed better academically and developed positive attitudes about themselves and their continued enrollment. Social integration was less important, since they depended upon their families for social, emotional and financial support. Environment pull was a factor for the participants, but all persisted regardless of the difficulties they experienced. It appeared that students experienced a four-part adjustment to the transfer, including (a) Expectations and Apprehension, (b) Acclimation, (c) Reality, and (d) Adjustment vs. Discouragement. It was concluded that first semester experiences were important for persistence, but that a longitudinal study should be conducted to understand implications of attitudinal development toward the University, which ultimately leads to the decision to depart or remain. A quantitative approach to determine the validity of adjustment phases should also be conducted.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities across the United States are experiencing an increase of American Indian¹ students on their campuses. From 1976 to 1994, institutions of higher education witnessed a 67 percent increase in American Indian student enrollment, compared to a 30 percent increase in overall student enrollment. During this time, the six-year graduation rate for American Indians was about 36 percent, compared to 56 percent overall. More American Indians are enrolling in higher education, but their persistence rates are much lower than the general population (Pavel, Skinner, Farris, Cahalan, Tippeconnic, & Stein, 1998).

The enrollment patterns in Montana mirror those of the nation. Between 1984 and 1995, Montana public colleges and universities saw a 58 percent increase in American Indian student enrollment, but American Indians earned only two percent of all bachelors degrees granted in Montana in 1996 (Pavel et al., 1998). These statistics reveal that more American Indians are enrolling in Montana's institutions of higher education, but like the nation in general, few persist long enough to earn bachelor's degrees.

¹ There are several names that may be attached to particular groups. For the purpose of this study, American Indian refers to the groups of people who identify themselves with any of the Indian Tribes. Unless the term "Native American" is used within a quote from another researcher, American Indian will be used consistently throughout the paper.

These circumstances are also reflected at a university located in south central Montana. Montana University² (MU) serves the surrounding region of Eastern Montana and Northern Wyoming. Enrollment at Montana University averages 3,700 students per semester. Because of its location, it serves students who transfer from community colleges in Montana and Wyoming, including Montana's seven tribal colleges. Between 1994 and 1999, an annual average of 687 students transferred to Montana University -- about six percent of those came from tribal colleges.

Problem

Evidence regarding American Indian students at Montana University reveals a problem of low persistence. Between 1990-1994, the first year persistence rate³ for white students at Montana University was 68 percent, while 57 percent for American Indians (Montana University Institutional Report, 1996). Meaningful statistical comparison between these groups was confounded and statistically troublesome since the number of American Indian transfer students was much lower than that of white students. As seen in Table 1-1, the persistence rates for American Indian students at Montana University were very inconsistent and on average lower than for white transfer students. Although

² Montana University is a pseudonym for the actual institution being studied.

³ Although most studies use persistence as a long-term concept, such as persistence from year-to-year or completion of a degree, for the purposes of this study persistence is defined as a student's continued enrollment from the time of acceptance to enrollment the second semester.

there was not a significant difference between the two groups ($\chi^2 = .125$, $df = 1$), persistence rates were lower for American Indian transfer students.

Of particular concern is the number of transfer students who enroll for one semester and do not return. Tinto (1998) maintains that the first ten weeks of initial enrollment are the most critical period for students entering a college or university. It is during this period that students are making the necessary adjustments, and acclimating to a new environment.

To explore this problem, Montana University transfer student data from fall, 1994 to spring, 1999 were examined. The database obtained from the University included only those white or American Indian students who had transferred from area two-year colleges. The colleges included were the three Montana community colleges, three Wyoming community colleges, and the seven Montana tribal colleges.

The database was broken down into two groups. Group One consisted of white students from all of the included colleges. Group Two included American Indian students who transferred from any of the tribal colleges. The groups were examined to determine the number of students who attended only one semester. As seen in Table 1-2, 11 percent of white students and 21 percent of American Indian students attended only one term. There was a significant difference between the groups ($\chi^2 = 4.49$, $df = 1$). American Indian students who transferred from a tribal college were twice as likely to drop out after one semester than were white students.

Table 1-1. Comparison of White and American Indian Transfer Student First Year Persistence at Montana University, 1990-1995*

Year Returned	White Students Persisting	American Indians Persisting
1991	69% N=143	80% N=4
1992	66% N=157	37% N=8
1993	71% N=166	60% N=15
1994	66% N=170	50% N=8
1995	68% N=187	61% N=13
Average	68%	57%

* $\chi^2=.125$, $\alpha=.05$ (not significant)

Research regarding American Indian college students is expanding. Nonetheless, it is still not fully understood how transfer from a tribal college to a four-year institution college affects them. Therefore, the problem this study addressed was that 21 percent of American Indian students who transfer from Montana tribal colleges to Montana University do not persist beyond the first semester, and the experiences that lead to a decision to depart or remain are not fully understood.

Table 1-2. Percentage of White and American Indian Transfer Students Attending Only One Term, 1994-1999*

Students	Total Number of Transfers	Attended Only One Semester	Percent
White Students	2795	302	11%
Tribal College Transfers	224	47	21%

* $\chi^2 = 4.49, \alpha = .05$

Purpose of the Study

American Indian students have goals and ambitions just as any other students attending a university. However, very little research has been conducted regarding how

well American Indian students fare when they transfer from tribal colleges to four-year institutions.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to gain an understanding of first semester experiences of American Indian College students as they relate to persistence factors, including background characteristics, social, and academic adjustment, institutional factors and attitudinal development. This was achieved through a qualitative research design. The approach to this problem did not lead to a comparison of groups, but asked what occurred and how events were experienced by American Indian transfer students. It allowed the researcher to explore the problem in detail, and in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). Each participant's view was taken into account and analyzed, seeking a personal perspective of their experiences. The intent was to discover if their reactions to the experience of transfer impacted their decisions to persist or depart

Theoretical Framework

There is insufficient understanding regarding persistence of American Indian students in higher education. Many researchers have utilized Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1975, 1987), which attempts to explain persistence for college students (Murguía, Padilla & Pavel, 1991; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfle, 1988; Williamson & Creamer, 1988). The most salient factors shown to be related to persistence among all students are social integration, academic integration, goal commitment and loyalty to the institution (Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Cleveland-Innes, 1994; Dell, 1991; Freidlander, 1981; Metzner & Bean, 1987;

Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Stoecker, Pascarella & Wolfle, 1988; Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1987; Vellella & Hu, 1991). According to Tinto (1987) the fit or congruency⁴ between the student and the institution is crucial to persistence, and social and academic integration strongly mediate that congruency.

There are conflicting results, however, with regard to minority student persistence, particularly for American Indians. Several researchers have questioned the usefulness of the model to predict persistence among those groups. Mayo, Murguía & Padilla, (1995) suggested that social integration may not be as important for American Indian students, and Pavel and Padilla (1993) maintained that academic preparation was not as predictive for American Indian students as it was for other groups of students.

The Longitudinal Model of the Type of Factors that Affect Retention Decisions

A theoretical model developed by Bean (1990) may be appropriate for use with American Indians (Figure 2-2). Bean maintains that the ideal model is one that is most useful to the problem at hand. "Models are simplified versions of reality in which the minutiae and detail are stripped away, leaving what are assumed to be important factors and the relationship between these factors. Models are important because they tie theory to specific situations" (p. 150). The Longitudinal Model of the Type of Factors that Affect Retention Decisions developed by Bean (1990) is a synthesis of the research on

⁴ Tinto (1987) explains that a student's academic and social integration interact and determine how well a student fits in at the institution. The better the fit, between the student and the social and academic atmosphere of the institution, the more likely the student will be committed to the institution.

attrition⁵ and persistence, based on the work of Spady (1970) (as cited in Bean, 1990), Tinto (1975, 1987) and Metzner and Bean (1987). The model is

a complex longitudinal process that begins with the background characteristics of students. Students interact with the college or university organizationally, academically, and socially. The environment represents a simultaneous factor that could influence students to decide to leave the school. Organizational, academic, and social interaction lead students to develop attitudes about the school. These attitudes affect institutional fit and loyalty -- both potent predictors of continued enrollment. (Bean, 1990, p. 154)

Bean (1990) concluded that several variables affect persistence. These include background variables, organizational variables, academic integration, social integration, environmental pull⁶, attitudes, and intent to leave. These variables represent experiences or beliefs and how based on those beliefs, a student makes the decision to persist or depart.

Although Tinto's (1975, 1987) model has been used for various studies on retention⁷ and persistence, Bean's model utilizes an important factor that may be useful to understand the American Indian experience in higher education. Much of the literature suggests that environmental pull is an important factor for American Indians (Naretto,

⁵ Attrition occurs when a student discontinues their enrollment at a particular university. This can be in the form of total withdrawal from the higher education system, or transfer to another institution.

⁶ Most students have commitments outside of the university, including family and work. Financial resources and choice of major may also have an influence on the decision to remain. This is environmental pull (Bean, 1990; Naretto, 1995; Richardson and Skinner, 1992; Towles and Spencer, 1993; Villella and Hu, 1991).

⁷ An institutional measurement of the continued enrollment of its students defines retention. Many researchers have described retention programs aimed at assisting students to remain enrolled (Bean, 1990; Henderson, 1991; Mayo et al., 1995; Richardson and Skinner, 1992; Tinto, 1982).

1995; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Towles & Spencer, 1993; Vellella & Hu, 1991). As examples of environmental pull, Bean (1990) includes lack of finances, significant others being in another location, the opportunity to transfer, the role that work may have, and family responsibilities. Since a close family system is central to American Indian culture (Davis, 1992; Herring, 1990; LaCounte, 1987; Oppelt, 1989; Wenzlaff & Biewer, 1996), as are heightened financial difficulties (Herring, 1990, Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Davis, 1992; Dodd et al., 1995; Huffman, et al., 1986; LaCounte, 1987), the use of Bean's (1990) model may be more useful to explain American Indian persistence. Therefore, the Longitudinal Model of the Type of Factors that Affect Retention Decisions (Bean, 1990) was used as a theoretical framework for the study.

Research Questions

The overarching question, and subquestions to be addressed in this study were as follows:

What are the experiences of American Indian students as they transfer from the Tribal College to Montana University?

- a) How are these experiences related to social or academic integration?
- b) Do environmental pull factors relate to their decision to remain or depart?
- c) Do background characteristics relate to their decision to remain or depart?
- d) Does their interaction with the university organization relate to their decision to remain or depart?

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study is an important contribution to the research related to American Indian college students. However, because it was a qualitative design, generalization of the results are not possible. Nonetheless, the findings serve as a starting point for understanding the experiences of American Indian College students as they transfer from a tribal college.

The findings are also important for Montana University. If the trend in Montana continues, increasing numbers of American Indian transfer students will be entering the University. It is important to have a better understanding of how American Indian students encounter the organization, social and academic culture at Montana University, and the environmental pull they experience.

Assumptions

An important assumption in the study was the willing cooperation of the participants. It was not within the scope of this study to insure honesty on the part of the students, so it was assumed that they were forthright in their interviews and conversations with the researcher.

Limitations

Due to the nature of qualitative research, this study had the following limitations:

1. Qualitative research results cannot be generalized to the larger population (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The findings of this study are not applicable to the American

- Indian student population, locally, statewide, or nationally. However, through the provision of detailed description the reader can determine its applicability to their particular situation (Creswell, 1998; Marshal & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998).
2. Although an understanding of experiences was sought, a complete understanding was not achieved. Therefore, the reader is cautioned not to assume that other college students in a similar setting will share the experiences of the participants of this study.
 3. Because the researcher was the primary instrument to collect data, researcher bias was not eliminated. Using member checking and an independent auditor to check analysis, researcher bias was reduced, and trustworthiness of the study was enhanced (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Format of Study

The following chapter leads the reader toward an understanding of the problem of American Indian persistence through an in-depth review of current literature surrounding the problem. A general understanding of retention and persistence is discussed, culminating in an analysis of issues surrounding minority and American Indian student persistence. Included in the discussion are issues and research specific to two-year colleges, including tribal colleges.

Chapter three explains how the research was conducted. An overview of qualitative research methodology is included. A description of the participants and the process and stages of data collection is provided, with emphasis on how the theoretical model was utilized in the formation of questions for the interviews.

Chapter four describes the participants' individual stories of adjustment. The first section describes the participants of the study. Each person's background and experiences are described. The second section explains the four phases of adjustment experienced by the group.

Chapter five details analysis and results in four sections. The first two are explanations of how those experiences are understood in relation to the theoretical framework and its various factors in relation to persistence. The last two are an overview of the findings and suggestions for how a revision of the model might explain the experiences of the group.

Chapter six is a discussion of the results and recommendations for implementation of findings and future research.

Summary

Over the past two decades, enrollment of American Indians in college has been increasing at a greater rate than that of the overall college student population over the last two decades. Although a similar trend exists in Montana, only two percent of the four-year degrees earned were by American Indians. Locally, persistence among American Indian students at Montana University is low, especially for the first semester after transfer.

There is a need to understand the dynamics of the first semester and how American Indian students experience and perceive it. Of particular interest is whether those experiences are related to persistence factors included in the theoretical model

developed by Bean (1990). The Longitudinal Model of the Type of Factors that Affect Retention Decisions provided a theoretical framework for the study, and research questions were derived from the model. This study utilized a qualitative approach to develop an understanding of the experiences of a group of American Indian students transferring from the Tribal College, to Montana University, and how those experiences relate to decisions regarding persistence or departure. It is through this understanding that Montana University can begin to assist American Indian College students as they transfer to the institution.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review has four main sections. The first explores theory regarding retention and persistence, including popular models used to explain persistence and departure, and related individual and institutional factors. The second section examines the research specific to minority student persistence and the individual and institutional actions that have been recommended by various researchers. Section three narrows to American Indian persistence, and the relevant individual and institutional aspects. The final section explores community and tribal colleges and how theories of persistence are applicable in those settings. A summary of the chapter is also included.

Retention and Persistence

“One fairly constant finding is that students leave school because they do not fit in”

(Bean, 1990, p. 149).

Research on retention and persistence is plentiful, as institutions of higher education have determined the need to maintain enrollment and to control costs for the institution and the individual (Metzner & Bean, 1987). There are both individual and institutional factors and characteristics that can influence students' decisions regarding enrollment in higher education. A review of the relevant literature highlights some of the issues surrounding retention and persistence decisions, including explanatory models.

The Model of Institutional Departure

One of the most widely used means to explain persistence and departure in higher education is the Model of Institutional Departure developed by Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987). According to Tinto, a student's decision to persist or depart depends on the level of social and academic integration a student develops while at the institution. Mediated by background characteristics such as academic preparation and family background, the levels of academic and social integration lead to the level of commitment or loyalty to the institution as well as commitment to pursue the career goal. Tinto explains that the higher the level of integration, both socially and academically, the more likely students are to persist (Figure 2-1).

Many researchers have relied on Tinto's model to explain the factors that impact a student's decision to withdraw from college. Since Tinto's model was designed to explain traditional age, majority status students, many researchers tested its effectiveness to explain minority and nontraditional status persistence. Using Tinto's model as a benchmark, several researchers (Murguía et al., 1991; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Stoecker et al., 1988; Williamson & Creamer, 1988) evaluated the ability of Tinto's model to cross cultural boundaries and its application to African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and American Indian students, and provided recommendations for accommodating ethnicity and nontraditional student status.

Stoecker et al. (1988) concluded that, for minority students, Tinto's model had "reasonable power to explain persistence-withdrawal behavior over a nine-year period" (p. 205). The authors found that the most effective intervention for persistence was

faculty contact, which Tinto (1982, 1987) noted in his research as well. The authors concluded that “academic and social integration were the most important collegiate determinates of persistence . . . [and that] strategies focused on enhancement of academic and social integration for specific groups may enhance persistence” (p. 208).

Murguía et al. (1991) conducted a qualitative study to check the application of Tinto’s model to minority student retention. The authors interviewed 24 junior and senior Hispanic and American Indian students, investigating the degree of social and academic integration they were experiencing, and how ethnicity was related to their level of social integration. They found that ethnicity was important in matters of connection to students’ families and friends, but because of their ethnic identity, socialization was predominately within their own ethnic group, especially during the initial adjustment to campus. Once an initial ethnic-centered group was formed, minority students often used these groups as the foundation from which to expand into more homogenous social groups. For those reasons, the authors stressed the importance of clubs and other organizations, which can serve as a social foundations for minority students.

Murguía et al. (1991) maintained that Tinto’s model was generally applicable to minority student persistence, but offered recommendations to strengthen the model to more effectively understand minority student retention. They suggested the consideration of ethnicity within the model, based on the possibility that it may limit access to the social structure of an institution. Administrators should assess the availability of appropriate enclaves or groups that a student may become involved.

Social and academic integration, according to Williamson and Creamer (1988), were student-based factors, not institutionally based, and institutions had less impact on the decision making process of the student than Tinto's model suggested. Because they used a slightly different definition of persistence than most researchers, they found that social integration was less of a factor for minority students, many of whom finished after more years than most. In the samples used for comparison, they included stop-in and stop-out behaviors of community college students. Stop-in and -out students are those that temporally interrupt their enrollment until a more opportune time arrives for them to attend. The researchers also allowed for 20 months of disenrollment before they defined students as dropouts. Background characteristics had more to do with persistence, and they contend that institutions have less control over a student's decision, even though programs are in place to prevent attrition.

This implies that the ability of Tinto's model to explain persistence is sensitive to changes in the definition of persistence. This may mean that, as the definition of college dropout changes from one who simply fails to re-enroll for a particular semester to one who fails to re-enroll for a specified length of time, the ability of academic and social integration to explain persistence diminishes. (p. 216)

Williamson and Creamer (1988) believed that Tinto's model was useful in explaining persistence at the institutional level, particularly when considering academic and social integration within the institution. However, the authors asserted that background characteristics held more predictive power for long-term persistence. These findings have profound implications for the study of American Indian college students, as

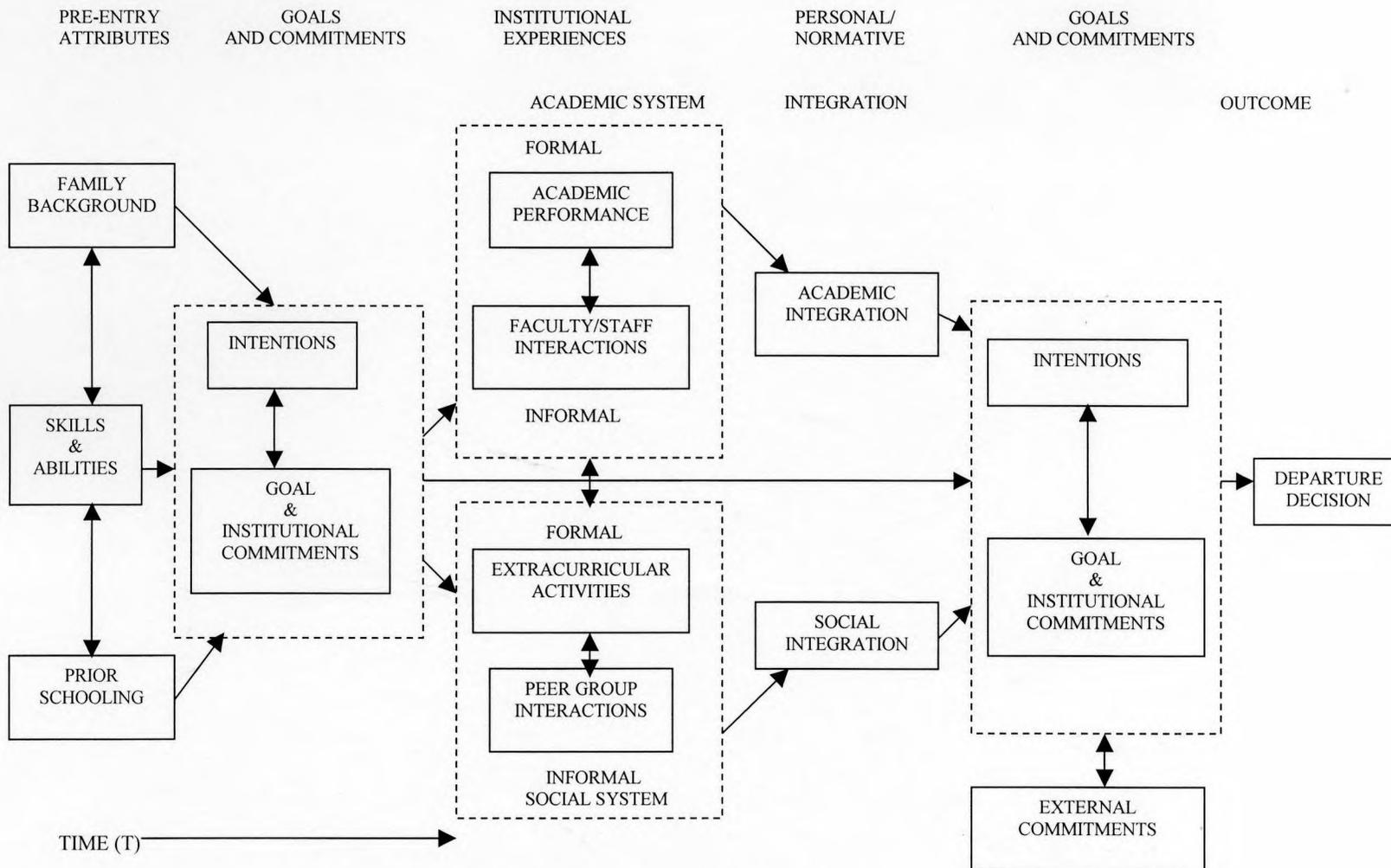


Figure 2-1. A Model of Institutional Departure (Tinto, 1987, p. 114)

they tend to be stop-in and-out students, and have more pre-enrollment risk factors than white students (Dodd et al., 1995; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

In contrast, other studies have found Tinto's Model to be less satisfactory in explaining the adjustment process. Naretto (1995) reported that although Tinto's model was defensible for use with adult students, background characteristics were less of a factor than institutional interventions. A caring and supportive environment endorsed by the institution was significantly related to persisting adult students' decision to maintain enrollment.

Towles and Spencer (1993) questioned the application of the Tinto model for use in retaining adult students in a distance education program. They found that 60 percent of the adult dropouts they studied wanted to re-enroll, but could not because of family and/or job-related responsibilities. They also asserted that faculty contact was not as important to adult students as suggested by Tinto (1982, 1987), and that some faculty contact with freshmen was actually detrimental, seen as pushy or invasive. They concluded that faculty may be, in some respects, a hindrance rather than a help in retaining students. Therefore, they declared that the model does not consider nontraditional status.

Tinto's model (1975, 1987) may not be as useful for setting retention policy, since it was based on experience within a college setting, and did not consider the many external factors that nontraditional students in distance programs may face. Towles and Spencer (1993) asserted that there was a reliance on social aspects of college, and not enough emphasis on student characteristics such as goal orientation or the natural concern

for the family. They suggested that the model be modified to accommodate adults attending in a nontraditional mode. Tinto (1987) considered goal orientation very important, but did not include environmental pull as important to institutional departure.

In summary, most researchers have found Tinto's model useful in understanding patterns of departure. Recommendations for improving the model include consideration of ethnicity, adjustment to the definition of persistence to include stop-out behavior and consideration of family matters for nontraditional students. Contradictions in the literature confound the understanding of American Indian persistence. Questions regarding the importance of background characteristics and environmental pull remain unanswered.

The Longitudinal Model of the Type of Factors that Affect Retention Decisions

Another theoretical model, developed by Bean (1990), may be appropriate to understand persistence among American Indians (Figure 2-2). The Longitudinal Model of the Type of Factors that Affect Retention Decisions, is a synthesis of the research on attrition and persistence, based on the work of Spady (1970, as cited in Bean, 1990), Tinto (1975, 1987) and Bean and Metzner (1985, as cited in Bean, 1990). Like Tinto's model, Bean's work was based on traditional, majority status, full time students. Unlike Tinto's model, the importance of background characteristics and environmental pull are highlighted. The model provides for an understanding of the interaction among importance variables such as academic, social and organizational constructs. According to Bean the model is

a complex longitudinal process that begins with the background characteristics of students. Students interact with the college or university organizationally, academically, and socially. The environment represents a simultaneous factor that could influence students to decide to leave the school. Organizational, academic, and social interaction lead student to develop attitudes about the school. These attitudes affect institutional fit and loyalty -- both potent predictors of continued enrollment. (p. 154)

Bean explains that in general, students leave college because they feel they do not fit in, "socially, academically, religiously or economically, or for some other reasons" (p, 149). Fitting in is a process that occurs in degrees over time. In addition, if a student has a poor match in one area, a good match in another may offset it.

An individual's behavior is the result of a cyclical process in which beliefs affect attitudes that lead to intentions that lead to the behavior in question. Hence, students' beliefs about their experience in school lead to attitudes toward the school (such as whether or not to stay) that affect the student's intent to stay (or leave) followed by actual attrition or retention. (p. 151)

Factors outside of the institution, or environmental pull, can also affect a student's decision to persist or depart. Logically, the institution has no control over environmental pull, and Bean insists that sometimes the decision to depart may be a positive decision for the student (see also Tinto, 1987).

Bean explains that there are several variables to consider regarding student persistence, which he integrates into the model. These include background variables, organizational variables, academic integration, social integration, environmental pull, attitudes, and intent to leave. These variables are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Background Variables. Bean maintains the most important background characteristics that impact persistence are academic success in high school, high but reasonable educational goals, college educated parents, financial wealth, and parental support. These variables give a student a good start on a university education.

Organizational Variables. Many colleges and universities have designed and implemented special programs to increase retention at their institutions. Bean explains that successful programs provide interventions that target those students who are most likely to drop out. However, all students interact with the organization, and that may be either positive or negative for students. The admissions office, classes and curriculum and how they are scheduled, rules and regulations, academic and social services, and financial aid are noteworthy. Financial aid is essential for most students on campus, but many students persist in the face of financial difficulty if they find the match at the university to be positive (see also Tinto, 1987).

Academic Integration. The better a student performs academically, the more likely he or she is to persist (Bean, 1990). For most students this requires good study habits and skills, positive attitudes, a value for scholarship and academic integrity. In addition, informal contact with faculty is one of the most robust factors related to student success.

Social Integration. Bean maintains that students must develop their social niche. Here they can find friendship, social support, and mutual concern for one another. Like informal faculty contact, socialization on campus is very important to persistence behavior, especially for traditional students who do not have social contacts outside the campus. Students must feel that someone cares about them as a person, and not as a number or a source of tuition.

Environmental Pull. Bean explains that eliminating all attrition is not possible, nor desirable. He maintains that colleges should not spend their resources in an attempt to affect things over which the institution has no control. Bean lists five sources of environmental pull. These are a perceived lack of finances, important friends or family that live outside the area, the opportunity to transfer, work and family responsibilities (especially among nontraditional students).

Attitudes. Bean maintains that students with positive attitudes are more likely to persist. The student's attitude about the university is especially important. When a student arrives with positive attitudes toward the school and has positive organizational, academic and social experiences, these positive attitudes are likely to be maintained or increase. When a student arrives with negative attitudes

and has negative experiences, the student is likely to leave....Satisfaction with the school, feelings of self development, a sense that the education they are receiving has a practical value for securing employment, and a sense of self-confidence as a student are a core block of attitudes positively affecting retention. Stress, on the other hand, reduces the likelihood of students remaining enrolled. (p. 165)

Intent to Leave. Bean incorporated this variable into the model because “intentions are hypothesized to intervene between attitudes and behavior” (p. 166). He explains that intent to leave is the best predictor of drop out. When asking students if they plan to return the following semester, an institution will immediately know who is at risk for dropping out.

In conclusion, Tinto’s model (1975,1987) has been used for various studies on retention and persistence. However, Bean’s model utilizes an important factor that may be useful to understand the American Indian experience in higher education. Much of the literature suggests that environmental pull is an important factor for American Indians (Naretto, 1995; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Towles & Spencer, 1993; Villella & Hu, 1991). As examples of environmental pull, Bean (1990) includes lack of finances, significant others being in another location, the opportunity to transfer, the role that work may have, and family responsibilities. Since a close family system is central to American Indian culture (Davis, 1992; Herring, 1990; LaCounte, 1987; Oppelt, 1989; Wenzlaff & Biewer, 1996), as are heightened financial difficulties (Herring, 1990; Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Davis, 1992; Dodd et al., 1995; Huffman Sill & Brokenleg, 1986; LaCounte, 1987), the use of Bean’s (1990) model may be useful to explain American Indian persistence.

