

Poster Type (Research)

**Piecing the Puzzle:
Using Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Student Departure to
Qualitatively Assess Undergraduate First-Year Experiences in the Agricultural Sciences**

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The Road Towards Graduation: Using Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Student Departure to Qualitatively Assess Undergraduate First-Year Experiences in the Agricultural Sciences

Introduction/Need for Research

The very fabric of an institution is its' students—the educational, social and philosophical advancement and transformation of students into professionals with enhanced employability through their experiences in college. While institutions are overjoyed at the sight of eager graduates ready and willing to create change, each year there are bittersweet feelings that can counteract such success—the recognition of students lost to untimely dropout decisions. Researchers identify the “experience” of college as psychological, cognitive, physical, social-cultural, and economical influences on the student, thus providing challenges in higher education that can impede successful degree completion. A known culprit? A student's interaction in their first year of matriculation, where dropping out is greatest (Tinto, 2006).

Currently, there is a small body of research available in agricultural education that addresses the predictors of retention, academic performance, and the first-year experiences of students in agriculture; there is little research that has analyzed the factors that influence first-year students' drop out decisions in the agricultural sciences. From a review of the literature, inquiries, conclusions, and recommendations for supporting first-year students in the agricultural sciences are limited (Koon et. al, 2009; Hansen, 2008; Kitchel et. al, 2008). The National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education and Communication signals the need to “develop a model to predict student success in colleges of agriculture and life sciences using demographic and psychological factors” (Osborne, n.d.). An effective model can only be developed through both quantitative and qualitative probe of student retention and attrition in the agricultural sciences, especially at the first-year level.

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's Theoretical Interactionalist Model of Student Departure (1993), though heavily criticized, is the most commonly used model to explain student departure in higher education (Braxton, 2004). It best describes the longitudinal processes of student persistence that affect a student's voluntary withdrawal from a postsecondary institution. The model asserts an interactionist approach to student departure by centering on the interaction between the student and the social structures of the college environment. Key components of the model are pre-entry variables, goals and commitments, academic and social systems, integration, and external commitments; all of these variables can positively or negatively influence a student's decision to depart from an institution over time.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to document and explore undergraduate agriculture science students' perceptions of their experiences in their first year of matriculation at a four-year Land Grant institution, and their current academic and social performance in their second year of study attributes of Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Student Departure. To examine this social situation and interaction, the researcher used “multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 13) including formal, in-depth interviews, student reflective journal assignments, and individual member checking sessions (Patton, 2003). This study used a comprehensive, criterion based purposeful sample of nine undergraduate students at [state] Land Grant Institution, who were first-year students enrolled in the Agricultural Science major, to assess student experiences of their first year and beyond.

Results/Findings

Results indicate that most agricultural science first-year students come to the college classroom as first generation students with limited and distorted information. They express strong ties to their respective families and to their FFA/4-H high school programs, advisors, and the farm; it is through their family's desires and their interactions in FFA/4-H and with their advisor that they have defined their intentions for attending college. While students describe the transition and adjustment to college as entering a world of the unknown, they come to college with the expectations to be both academically and socially challenged and come with strong intentions to acquire a college degree—a degree that symbolizes financial stability, social accomplishment, and increased opportunity in the agricultural profession. During their first year, students experienced great challenge in their interactions with the academic and social characteristics of campus life; their transition to the demands of college is both difficult and complicated. Students acknowledged that quite often their inability to maneuver campus technology, finance their education with external commitments like work, develop meaningful relationships on campus, perform successfully in courses and balance course loads, and finally, juggle time in an equation with making effective decisions provides them with difficulty in handling the experience of college. It is important to note that many students expressed disdain for college courses, especially agricultural based courses, which did not include hands-on activities.

Though limited in discussion, students do express positive experiences in college through their abilities to discover and explore without the structure, guidance, and rules that they had in their parent's homes. They articulated that they do have enjoyment in trying new things, meeting new people, and attending academic and social events—this enjoyment only comes when they are successful in balancing the new freedom with their responsibilities in college.

Finally, students express experiencing challenges to the transition to and adjustment in their second year at Virginia Tech as well. They acknowledge that in their second year they are working diligently to find a niche in their academic and social communities, meet the kicked academic intensity in courses, exhibit maturity in decision making and time management, and finally, continue toward meeting the intention to acquire a degree in the agricultural sciences.

Conclusions

The findings of this research highlight several areas for further investigation. The classification of these students as first generation students warrants the need for more detailed attention and proactive and reactive intervention programs and materials to help students to transition and adjust to college. The role of the FFA/4-H program and advisor seems critical to the student's identity, and how they make meaning of their future opportunities, college and career choices, and college performance. Another emergent concept is the need for college students to identify with the roles, expectations, and behavior of being a college student as an indicator of student engagement and integration into the college environment (Tinto, 1993). Finally, students describe their second year in college as a transition and adjustment period as well. In their second year, students are still trying to formulate and negotiate the characteristics of the college environment and make meaning of that environment through dichotomous paths: their past performance in agriculture and future planning for an agricultural profession.

Tackling the underlying problems of first-year retention specific to the agricultural sciences will assist in identifying and recruiting students to enter programs, as well as, to retain them to graduation. In the agricultural sciences, student dropout is risky business for the institution, colleges of agriculture, the student, employing the agricultural profession, and even society. The need to focus research and study on this population is ever important to the success of agricultural programs, the discipline, and piecing together the departure puzzle.

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