

Environment and Affect: Towards an Emotional Geography of Student Persistence

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Student persistence is a perennial problem for higher education. From lost revenue for colleges and universities to lost opportunity and development for students, educational scholars have had much incentive to examine the problem. In this paper, we review some of the prominent assessments of student persistence in research from various theoretical perspectives. Further, we explore how scholars have studied environmental factors in persistence and to a lesser extent student affect, yet we find the relationship between these two to be only lightly engaged in the literature. The emerging discipline of emotional geography offers to draw out new insights at the intersection of environment and affect, bringing a fresh perspective and opening up new research questions to engage with the problem of intolerably low student persistence.

Keywords: persistence, college departure, environment, affect, emotional geography

College and university administrators devote considerable attention to student retention and rightfully so; college graduation rates have consistently hovered around 50% for decades (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). That only 50% of students who begin college persist to graduation is tragic when considering the costs to the university, and perhaps most importantly what is forfeited by the student. Small private institutions are often dependent upon student tuition to operate and many public institutions receive less state funding than they once had. Additionally, many states are now considering linking state appropriations to a number of performance indicators, with graduation percentages being one of those marks of institutional effectiveness (Barefoot, 2004). While unrealized tuition revenue is not to be discounted, the lost intellectual investment in an individual's higher education is perhaps most compelling. To the individual student, the benefits of attending college are profound. College attendance has a meaningful positive influence on a broad range of developmental characteristics, and although individuals who do not attend college may also exhibit similar developmental changes, college students appear to show greater and more rapid development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2009). In a review of the studies of how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reached a number of conclusions about the impact of college on students. College students show tremendous

gains in verbal and written communication, exhibit greater reflective judgment, develop critical thinking and intellectual flexibility, and place a greater value on aesthetic and intellectual matters (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Individuals who attend college show a greater intellectual orientation and internal locus of control which is helpful while in college but also in post-college life. The growth and development that occurs while in college affords students a greater likelihood to continue learning throughout their lives. What is developed in college increases the likelihood of living a satisfying life post-graduation. Earning a bachelor's degree is associated with long-term social, cognitive, and economic benefits that are often perpetuated by future generations. An educated population is beneficial not only to the individual, but also to the communities of which they are members (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). In benefit to their communities, individuals who attended college show principled reasoning in judging moral issues, demonstrate an acceptance of nontraditional general roles, and display a more liberal social and political attitude (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Although educational scholars have adopted a number of theoretical perspectives and considerations in exploring the problems of post-secondary student attrition, we bring another—the emerging sub-discipline in human geography of

emotional geography. Because “clearly, our emotions matter” (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2007, p. 1), we argue for the consideration of the emotional aspects of post-secondary environments to better understand student persistence. To do so, we first review five prominent theoretical perspectives in the student persistence literature. We follow this overview of the existing approaches to student persistence with the introduction of the rich perspectives of emotional geography. Next, we draw upon the influential work of Strange and Banning (2001) that focused on how campus environments may support student success. Although the work outlines the importance of space and place in student experiences, Strange and Banning failed to acknowledge the role of emotions in students’ experiences of their post-secondary environments. To address this failure, we draw upon the promising findings in a few examples of emotional geographies of education. We end the paper with a discussion of implications for future research, and conclusions drawn from this re-examination of research in student persistence.

Theoretical Perspectives, Theories, Models: Old and New

According to Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007), there are five prominent theoretical perspectives that have been utilized to examine student departure: sociological, organizational, psychological, economic, and cultural. Each of these approaches brings different components of the issues surrounding student persistence to the fore. A review of these perspectives and the theories associated with them reveals the neglect of the emotional experiences of students in post-secondary education. Thus, in addition to these five theoretical perspectives, a new approach, emotional geographies, may provide additional insight into the study of student persistence.

To embark on the study of student persistence from an emotional geographies lens, it is important to review the existing studies of student persistence with the understanding that the five theoretical perspectives proposed by Kuh et al. (2007) are evident in the theories of student persistence. Perhaps the most widely used approach to

understand student persistence is Vincent Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure. Since students do not experience college in isolation, the impact of individuals both in the college environment and from home is a significant consideration. Sociological perspectives, used to inform Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, are used to explore the level of academic and social integration that students experience. Tinto’s (1993) model consists of three stages within the departure process: separation, transition, and integration. Tinto (1988) saw college students as moving from one community to another community. Tinto (1988) explained that during the separation stage, students who are more likely to persist, separate from membership within past communities, often family and friends, in order to integrate fully into a new environment. Students who are not fully able to separate from past communities often struggle during the transition to college. Tinto (1988) saw the second stage, the transition phase, as a time of passage from old communities to new communities. A student who comes from a community that has drastically different values and norms from the new college community will often struggle in the transition phase (Tinto, 1988).

From a sociological perspective, students in the transition phase have not yet created personal bonds with members from the new college community. The student does not yet have strong connections to either the new community, nor if they successfully separated from past communities, to members from their former environment. During the third stage, incorporation, the student is tasked with developing relationships with members of the college community (Tinto, 1988). It is through these relationships that the new college student may become familiar with and adopt the norms and behavioral patterns of the new community (Tinto, 1988). Not every student will form the connections needed to persist and some will leave college.

The lack of an adequate familial support system is often significant to the departure decision as revealed in a later study by Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000). First-generation students have often reported less encouragement to attend college than students with parents who have attended college

(Elkins et al., 2000). Students from lower-level of high-school academic preparation also persist at lower levels. First generation college students and students who achieve at lower academic levels may not receive the support from their home communities that they need. It may be that friends and family doubt the ability of their student to be successful through graduation (Elkins et al., 2000).

Organizational perspectives examine the ways in which institutional features influence student persistence. A sense of belonging or “fit” is shaped by the student interactions and experiences within an institution (Kuh et al., 2007). This sense of belonging shapes the student attitude, which shapes behavior; ultimately those behaviors become actions (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Berger and Milem (2000) grouped institutional characteristics into two categories, the structural-demographic features and the organizational behavior dimensions. Structural-demographic characteristics are those characteristics of an institution (size, student/faculty ratio, urban/rural, public/private) that influence the student’s sense of belonging (Berger & Milem, 2000). Although institutional structural-demographic characteristics seem to exert little influence on student persistence, there are two general exceptions (Reason, 2009). Women who attend women’s institutions and African-American’s who attend historically black colleges of universities (HBCUs) are more likely to persist than attending co-educational institutions or non HBCUs respectively (Reason, 2009). The second exception, institutional quality, is also associated with higher levels of student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Factors associated with the institution often align with the individual characteristics of the student to create a sense of belonging.

A cultural perspective of student persistence informs any understanding of the reasons for the departure of students who are historically underrepresented (Kuh et al., 2007). Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure, with stages of separation, transition, and integration, highlights the struggle that some students may encounter in the college-going process. Some students may be unable or even unwilling to separate from their

home culture and acquiesce to the norms, values, and traditions of a new culture (Reason, 2009). A more recent study of historically underrepresented populations has revealed the importance of family, especially as a significant component of the students’ pre-college life and how family influences student persistence (Reason, 2009). It is perhaps the lack of cultural influences within Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure that has caused some to question the model’s effectiveness in explaining the departure patterns of today’s college student.

Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, despite its widespread acceptance in higher education, has been perceived by some to be flawed. For one, William Tierney (1992) disputed the notion that today’s college students should be expected to separate entirely from their “home” culture. Additionally, Tinto’s model may have failed to consider the significance of family as students engage in college. As the demographics of college students change, the role of family in the lives of historically underrepresented students is becoming more significant (Reason, 2009). The importance of family support for all students may be an important influencing factor in student persistence. Furthermore, Tinto’s model, it is argued by Tierney (1992) privileges some cultures over others. If one culture is expected to be adopted, usually the white-male dominant culture of most college campuses, it is done so at the expense of other abandoned cultures.

Tinto’s model is also critiqued as not incorporating the entirety of what may influence the college student (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). In response to the perceived shortcomings of the existing models of student persistence, Terenzini and Reason (2005) proposed a new model that attempts to include every external and internal influence on the student decision to persist in college. Terenzini and Reason included organizational context, the peer environment, and individual student experiences (classroom, out-of-class, and curricular experiences) as part of the college experience.

Although Tinto’s model has a strong sociological foundation, the others perspectives as identified by Kuh et al. (2007) are also evident. The same holds

true for subsequent persistent theories that were proposed in complement to or as a revision to Tinto's model. Certainly later theories address cultural considerations that were not a part of Tinto's original model. It would appear that all of the perspectives have a psychological component as students' way of thinking is influenced by sociological, organizational, economic, and cultural perspectives. For example, the way in which an institution is organized and structured has an impact on how the student perceives their locus of control. A strict, rule heavy institution may cause students to see that much is out of their control which will effect self-efficacy and esteem. Cultural perspectives have a strong influence on student psychology. Historically underrepresented students experience challenges that often inhibit their ability to take full advantage of the resources and learning opportunities available in college (Kuh et al., 2007). Perpetuated systems of exclusion may have damaging psychological effects. As will be discussed later, we see that more recent models of student persistence incorporate all five prominent perspectives while considering changing college student demographics that incorporates greater non-white participation.

What, then, can the emerging sub-discipline of emotional geography bring to the conversation? One approach to answering this question is breaking the name into its two parts, the "emotional" and the "geography." Although some notions of the emotional aspects of college-going life are considered within the aforementioned theoretical perspectives, they fail to put emotional experience front and center, with all of its subtlety and nuance. This absence is understandable, as emotions are never simply surface phenomena, nor easy to observe, define, or demarcate (Bondi et al., 2007). The inherent difficulties in communicating the emotional elements underlying every day life have resulted in a student persistence literature that tends to avoid or downplay student emotions. Although this is beginning to shift (see O'Keeffe, 2013), a fuller consideration that "emotions are situated within, and co-constitutive of, our social lives" (Bondi et al., 2007, p. 2) reveals a promising direction for understanding student persistence by acknowledging that emotions are a profound part of

student experience.

Geographers analyze phenomena through the lens of *spatial* relations and practices. Predominantly concerned with spatial characteristics such as location, scale, and distance, geography calls for an interpretation of our world based in empirics. For geographers, the consideration of student emotions means situating them within post-secondary spaces. Thus emotional geography can add to the student persistence literature by fully considering emotions, and doing so through understanding emotion in terms of "spatial mediation and articulation" rather than something entirely interiorized (Bondi et al., 2007, p. 3). This focus on the spaces of student persistence is not entirely new, as we will discuss below. Yet we will continue to find a lack of engagement with student emotions.

Environmental Approaches to Student Persistence

Educational scholars have long recognized the important influences of environmental factors in student persistence (Astin, 1984, Wei et al., 2011). The study of persistence from an emotional geography perspective should be grounded in prior studies that examine the influence of environments on student persistence. One particularly influential text attempted to comprehensively identify the various components of educational environments is *Educating by Design* by Strange and Banning (2001). Strange and Banning identified four key components of human environments: the physical layout, characteristics of the people who inhabit environments, organizational structures, and the collective perceptions of the culture of the environment.

The physical environment of the college has an often neglected or misunderstood influence on students (Strange & Banning, 2001). The physical environment, through its structures, symbols, and design communicates much about what is valued and cherished on the college campus. What is communicated by the campus's physical environment has a profound influence on the student's sense of belonging. Although Strange and

Banning (2001) presented the role of design and space, through their discussion of physical environments, as influencing student behavior, they did not discuss how space and design elicit student emotion.

The characteristics of the individuals within the environment are also significant to the human environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). The persistence models of Tinto (1993) and Terenzini and Reason (2005) emphasize the interactions between the student and individuals within his or her environment as critical to any understanding of student persistence. Students perceive the peer environment as the “sense of the place” as they develop an understanding of what is expected academically and socially (Reason, 2009). The ways in which students interact with others within the college environment help form or hinder a feeling of belonging. Students who make connections, even with only one other individual, are more likely to persist (O’Keeffe, 2013).

Strange and Banning (2001) also noted that the ways in which an organization is structured is also a key component to human environments. In addition to structural-demographic features of the institution, Berger and Milem (2000) noted that organizational behavior dimensions also influence student persistence. The effects of the institution are more what the institution does (or does not do) than the characteristics of the institution (Reason, 2009). Berger (2001-2002) organized institutions into five types: bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic. If a student perceives that the school promotes communication, participation, fairness, and inclusion (collegial), or an environment that is steeped in developing a shared meaning through a reverence of institutional history and traditions (symbolic) students are more likely to integrate into the college environment and persist (Berger 2001-2002). If students feel that the resources of the college are aligned to support student success and that there is a directed effort on behalf of the college to integrate services in support of the student, a greater level of student satisfaction is often noted (Reason, 2009). Consequently, students who perceive the college environment to be fraught with infighting and competition for resources (political)

or that the college treats students as just another number (bureaucratic) are less likely to persist (Reason, 2009).

The fourth and final characteristic of the human environment is how the student subjectively views the culture and climate of the college environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). Bean and Eaton (2000) proposed a psychological model of student retention whereas the adjustment to college is dependent on self-assessment within a given environment and an adaptation to that environment. Student psychological aspects, self-efficacy, coping strategies, and locus of control, play an important role in how students perceive the college environment. For example, a student who has positive self-efficacy will be better able to navigate academic and social integration if he or she believes that they are able to do so. In turn, this successful integration will inform future interactions within the college environment. Student beliefs lead to intention which ultimately leads to actions; actions are seen as essentially choices (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

Although the chapters of Strange and Banning’s (2001) volume attempt to comprehensively engage with the characteristics of post-secondary environments, the impacts of emotions are not meaningfully addressed. For Strange and Banning, and in educational discourse more largely, emotions are understood through the lens of proper or improper, or those that require intervention versus those that are an asset to student persistence. These conceptions of the emotions of post-secondary experiences are limited, as they set up a false dichotomy of emotions as either good or bad. Administrators, student affairs professionals, faculty, and other staff who work from this understanding of emotion ultimately pathologize emotions and frame the apparently ugly or bad emotions as something to be treated or rectified (Kenway & Youdell, 2011). Another conception of emotions, and how they interact with environments, is warranted.

Some research into the emotional geographies of education that engage with a more complicated conception of emotion has begun to emerge. Researchers have begun to expose and engage how

emotions and educational space can be understood as mutually constitutive (Addison, 2011; Grinberg, 2011, Nairn & Higgins, 2011, Zemblayas, 2011). This re-centering of emotions as a primary concern of research, enriched by a spatial/environmental lens, can reveal new specificities of student experiences related to persistence. For instance, while Strange and Banning (2001) recognize that there are psychological components to student environments, they stop short of understanding how those components play out for students. Most of the initial probes into the emotional geographies of education are focused on primary and secondary schools, but some research is emerging around post-secondary contexts (e.g. De Leeuw, Parkes, & Thien, 2013; Huber, 2010; Pederson, 2013). For instance, the emotional contingencies of undergraduate medical programs—specifically their intensity and rigor—are critically examined for their impacts upon students (De Leeuw et al, 2013). Other scholars have explored the emerging frustrations and anxieties of postsecondary instructors with increasingly diverse student populations, new technologies and media, and challenges to traditional pedagogies (Huber, 2010). Intriguingly, Pederson (2013) considers the emotionally fraught practices of veterinary students who must learn to both empathize and distance themselves in engaging with the prospective profession. This research provides helpful orientations for student persistence researchers moving forward, as student persistence has yet to be a topic of inquiry and engagement in emotional geography.

Discussion: Towards an Emotional Geography of Student Persistence

After reviewing the theoretical and environmental landscape of student persistence research, the neglect of the emotional perspectives and how they are spatially mediated is apparent. We acknowledge that this is not surprising, especially if we consider emotions outside of a good versus bad dichotomy. Outside of that conception, emotions are messy, complicated and uncomfortable and therefore exceedingly difficult to research. However, the emerging inquires of

emotional geography blazed a trail for persistence researchers to explore.

Implications: How to Bring Emotional Geography to the Research

As mentioned above, emotional geography is based in the conception that our emotions and the spaces we inhabit as mutually constitutive (Davidson et al., 2007). From this perspective, we can see outline some initially promising research questions to orient fresh examinations of student persistence. We conceive of these questions from three different scales: personal, regional, and national. First, how do particular students' situations delineate particular emotional geographies? To borrow from Kuh et al. (2007), how do the social, psychological, economic, and cultural aspects of individual identity impact students' emotional experiences in post-secondary educational spaces? What kind of emotional experiences and spaces can be associated with student persistence and attrition? Discovering the emotional geographies of student persistence means rooting the research in case studies of individual experiences.

Second, how do students' emotional experiences within post-secondary environments vary from campus to campus? While it must be understood that every individual's experience of place will be unique, can the exploration of these various emotional geographies inform a general emotional profile of an entire campus? What emotions emerge in particular settings, how are those settings affected by those emotions? This perspective could prove helpful to admissions and recruitment personnel, who can more accurately inform potential students of the environment their particular campus has to offer. Thus, better matches between students and institutions are possible, improving student retention rates.

Third, in considering the high rates of student attrition nationally, what roles do students' emotional experiences within post-secondary environments play? The question frames what is the most oblique and preliminary of questions regarding an emotional geography perspective on

student persistence. What can emotional geography tell us about student persistence? This calls for a variety of inquires situated in an array of institutions and student identities. Questions must be tailored the varying parameters of two-year and four-year institutions, undergraduate and graduate programs, arts and sciences as well as professional schools. Social identities including gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, and ability all lend particular considerations to spatial-emotional inquiry.

Conclusions

The impacts of emotions, and specifically through a spatially informed perspective, are an under-examined yet potentially profound component of student experiences. However promising, the perspectives of emotional geographies cannot be considered holistic. Rather, considering the emotional geographies of student persistence adds another perspective, potentially revealing new avenues for supporting students' completion of post-secondary degrees. Taking our emotions seriously and outside a reductive, marginalizing framework opens up new avenues for student engagement and the support of persistence through graduation.

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