

Socio-Academic Integrative Moments: Rethinking Academic and Social Integration Among Two-Year College Students in Career-Related Programs

College student persistence and dropout have been studied for decades, but little inquiry has focused on community college or private two-year college students. Although about half of first-time postsecondary students enroll in a two-year college, researchers understand little about why only approximately a quarter of these degree-seekers complete any degree five years after entrance (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Models that exist to aid our understanding have been generated primarily from research on residential, four-year college students. The present analysis uses rich qualitative data to excavate the potential of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure for understanding the dynamics of persistence for a more nontraditional group—two-year college commuting students. To better reflect how these students successfully cultivate feelings of belonging and competence, reinforce goal commitment, and access valuable social capital, a new conceptual fusion of the formerly distinct processes of academic integration and social integration is considered.

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Theoretical Framework and Research Literature

The Appeal and Relevance of Tinto's Model

The major models of persistence include Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1987, 1993), Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984), and Pascarella's model (1985). All the models were developed based on traditional students in traditional residential institutions. However, Tinto's theory, despite its origins, leaves room for an examination of students' institutional experiences in a way that does not necessarily need to be dependent on the traditional college-student lifestyle.¹ Building on Durkheim (1951), a conceptual cornerstone of the theory is that a *subjective* sense of belonging and membership is a fundamental component of student decisions and outcomes. Students choose to persist when they perceive intellectual and social congruence, or a normative fit between the student and the values, social rules, and academic quality of the college community. This congruence with the academic and social systems of the college reinforces a student's commitment to their institution and educational goals. Tinto referred to this as "academic integration" and "social integration," and described lack of integration as isolation, or incongruence between a student and the intellectual and social communities in the college, which hinders commitment and leads to withdrawal. This sociology grounds the model, now the "most studied, tested, revised, and critiqued in the literature" (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Over 700 studies have cited the model, creating a Tintonian Dynasty (Bensimon, 2007).

Most studies find social and academic integration matter, to some extent, for persistence among four-year students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) but the relative importance of each form of integration is contested. Some research highlights the importance of in-class academic experiences (e.g., Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996), but Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) found a lack of empirical backing for the influence of academic integration in residential universities. They suggest serious revisions to Tinto's model, including dropping academic integration from the model and conceptually expanding toward six factors that influence social integration for residential students. Nevertheless, several studies find the two forms of integration to be interconnected (Tinto, 1998). When both forms occur, students are even more likely to persist (Stage, 1989), and one form of integration can act as a vehicle for the other form of integration, with high levels of social integration compensating for weaker academic integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Stage, 1989; Tinto, 1975).

Applying the model to two-year and other commuting students has generated even more mixed, and less solid, results. On the one hand, some research suggests the model is not relevant. Voorhees (1987) found no association between persistence and integration in one community college. For commuting students, Bean and Metzner (1985), Tinto himself (1993), and Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) contend background characteristics and external circumstances have a greater impact on persistence than on-campus factors. This aligns with research on the pivotal influence of significant others who encourage college goals in students' personal lives (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Nora, 1987; Nora, Attinasi, & Matonak, 1990). On the other hand, studies using national two-year samples (Deil-Amen, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) and a meta-analysis of six studies (Wortman & Napoli, 1996) show academic and social integration do influence attainment, but the findings of most studies are mixed regarding which form of integration is most important. Halpin (1990), Mutter (1992), and Pascarella and Chapman (1983) found community college persistence was influenced by academic integration, not social, and Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994), and later Tinto (1997) found classroom involvement not only facilitates academic integration, but also promotes integration beyond the classroom. In contrast, other scholars find community college students, similar to racial/ethnic minority students in other settings, experience "validation" *outside* the classroom, which influences persistence (Attinasi, 1989; Rendon, 1994; Terenzini et al., 1994). Also, several qualitative studies find the social dimensions of two-year colleges play a role in persistence, with intellectual and social contact with faculty, staff, and other students outside of class of particular salience (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; London, 1978; Neuman & Riesman, 1980; Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Weis, 1985).

In light of this multiplicity of findings, it is important to realize most attempts to validate Tinto's model more generally (Braxton et al., 1997; Braxton et al., 2004), do not specifically address the validity of social and academic integration as valuable concepts. In fact, few studies examine the direct relationship between integration and persistence, since the model theorizes an indirect relationship via goal commitment or institutional commitment. Therefore, further exploring the concepts upon which Tinto's interactionalist framework rests is a useful task. Garnering insight from past and current research that qualitatively explores students' direct experience with these processes can be especially valuable. Taking cues from accumulated prior quantitative research is prudent as well. Braxton and colleagues (2004) reviewed the relatively few attempts to test Tinto's theory on two-year and other commuting students,

and they propose a theory of student departure to apply to commuter institutions. In contrast to residential universities, they expect academic integration, or “academic communities” (p. 48) play an important role in enhancing student commitment, in addition to the major influences of student entry characteristics, family, work, and finances.

*The Challenges and Value of Applying Tinto to
Marginalized and Non-Traditional Students*

Social and academic integration may be valuable concepts to be retained, but scholars should rethink how to better conceptualize and measure the concepts for two-year college students. In fact, Braxton et al. (1997) suggested strengthening Tinto’s model by identifying new sources of academic and social integration. The present study considers how these concepts should be altered to apply more appropriately to two-year students and the relevance of class, race and ethnicity for their integrative experiences.

Critics fault Tinto’s model as inadequate for minority students because it assumes disconnection from a home community must occur before integration into a college community can happen (e.g. Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Such critiques reinforce the need to understand the experiences of marginalized students of another type—two-year college students—whose institutional environments have not been thoroughly incorporated into prior retention models (Reason, 2003; Rendon, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000).² The vast majority of two-year students enroll in community colleges while remaining in their communities of origin, so the issue of separating from a culture of origin is less salient. After all, the name of the institution implies students can attend “college” while remaining in the “community.” Such circumstances differ markedly from the residential contexts on which the above critiques were based, and the work of Torres (2006) on commuting university students suggests key differences do exist. The dynamics of race, class, and culture have not yet been adequately explored in *two-year* contexts while utilizing Tinto’s concept of integration to frame the discussion.

It is important to explore two-year students’ own perspective on their experience of integration because this subjective process is central to Tinto’s model. Research has not carefully explored how they perceive a normative congruence between their own expectations and what their college offers.³ This subjective component was present in Spady (1971) and Tinto (1993), but it is complex and difficult to measure, leaving researchers to concentrate on *behaviors* while neglecting students’ *psychological experience* of identification and affiliation within campus com-

munities. This distinction between behavior (participation, involvement) and a psychological sense of integration was highlighted over a decade ago by Hurtado and Carter (1997) who suggested that "integration can mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education" (p. 326–332). These and other critics of Tinto's model have attended to this subjective framework as it applies to racial and ethnic minority students in four-year residential institutions, but they have not considered how the psychological components of integration might differ for two-year college commuting students. Torres (2006) noted that commuting students do frame their expectations of what they need from their institution differently than residential students. They are "not as concerned with whether they fit with the environment as much as whether they understood how to navigate the system" (p. 311). They also confront the unique psychological challenges of continually negotiating between their college demands and their family and work obligations, and they are affected by how closely the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators reflect a commitment to the welfare of students (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClen- don, 2004).

Other critics claim Tinto's model wrongly depicts the student as author of his or her success, while the advocacy of practitioners and "institutional agents" (Stanton-Salazaar, 1997, 2001) in facilitating the success of minority and two-year students is overlooked (Bensimon, 2007). This critique foregrounds the possibility that institutional agents, rather than just the characteristics or behaviors of students, play a pivotal role in providing social capital and other benefits to enable student persistence. Research on student diversity on traditional campuses, for instance, emphasizes the importance of faculty-student interactions on African American and Latino student academic performance and persistence (Allen, 1992; Anaya & Cole, 2001; Davis, 1991; Nettles, 1991) and the importance of peer interaction about academic matters, course-related faculty contact, and mentor relationships for minority students' intellectual self-concept (Cole, 2007). These studies, combined with the critiques of Guiffrida (2006), Tierney (1992, 1999), and Bensimon (2007), inform a need to focus on the role of the institutionally-located *people* who make success possible for students often thought to be at-risk of non-persistence and on the institutional spaces where such support and integrative processes take place. The prior research noted above suggests marginalized students are more successful at navigating the cultural, psychosocial, and intellectual college terrain when they benefit from key forms of assistance from institutional agents. Thus far, such processes have been little explored within community colleges.

*Attention to the Where and How Integration Happens
Among Two-Year Students*

Given the prominence of Tinto's model, the potential of its sociological underpinnings, and evidence that applicability of the model varies by institutional level and type, the present study qualitatively explores how the concept of integration resonates for a sample of non-traditional, commuting, two-year college students. Research has not fully conceptualized, measured, or operationalized integration effectively for students who commute, and few studies identify how or where the process of integration occurs in non-residential colleges. Although many studies have *quantified* social⁴ and academic⁵ integration into measurable behaviors and assessed their impact on student outcomes, researchers still understand little about the quality and nature of integrative processes—especially how and why certain actions enhance belonging, commitment, and persistence for *two-year* commuting students, who are among the most marginalized in higher education. As noted by Estella Bensimon in her ASHE presidential address:

The reality is that underperformance, dropping out, and low degree-attainment is a problem that affects the “marginal” student disproportionately, yet student success, with few exceptions, is treated as a generic phenomenon and many of the measurement instruments and analytical models do not account for the unique circumstances of “students at the margins.” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 449)

No other study has qualitatively analyzed students' perceptions of the integration process across several different two-year institutions, whose students are among those most likely to forego on-campus activities traditionally associated with integration and most likely to possess tenuous goals (Manski, 1989). Relevant questions remain unanswered. Do integrative behaviors of two-year college students differ substantially from those we've traditionally measured among four-year students? What are the qualitative dimensions of this integrative process, particularly when opportunities for traditional forms of integration are limited and the norms and expectations of college life are different? The present study explores how a variety of two-year college students describe their experiences of belonging and congruence in an attempt to identify how and where integration occurs for them and the experiences that engender such feelings and motivate their behavior. It is hypothesized that their experiences may differ from traditional measures of such processes, which have been generated from studies of more traditional contexts.

Methods

Data were collected as part of a multi-method, multi-site study that employed triangulation, utilizing surveys, interviews, and observations. A total of 238 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, staff, and faculty at seven public community and seven private two-year colleges in and near a large Midwestern city.⁶ Of the 238 interviews, 125 were students selected to ensure variability in race, SES, gender, age, and program of study. Nearly all students were selected within comparable business/secretarial, computer/electronics, and medical/health programs across public and private institutions. Thirty-seven percent of the students were Latino, 35% African-American, 19% White, and 9% of Asian, Indian, or Middle-Eastern decent. Two-thirds attended an "urban" college, and 76% were first-generation college students. Eighty-one percent self-reported coming from low (below \$30K) to middle income (\$30K–\$60K) families, and their ages ranged from 18 to 46 with an average age of 24.

Interviews were an hour long and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A team of three researchers content analyzed the interviews by first developing initial codes.⁷ Then, based on both the intersection and partitioning of those initial codes, themes and sub-themes were identified. The initial codes of commitment, belonging, and integration were content analyzed and subdivided into themes and coded as academic, social, fitting-in, comfort/discomfort, connection/disconnection, college or program size, SES, motivation, teachers, advisors, in-class, out-of-class, friends, help/support, discouragement, clubs/groups, cohorts, and self-perception. These codes were then scanned for content that intersected with the first set of initial codes and sub themes and checked for patterns across program of enrollment, age, and race/ethnicity.

To enhance reliability of data collection and coding (Babbie, 2004), three researchers conducted the interviews and were similarly trained with a standardized interview format (Kirk & Miller, 1986; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).⁸ To validate the data, informant feedback was provided.⁹ To further enhance validity, as relationships and themes in the data emerged, new interviews were conducted at different institutions to replicate the themes to confirm patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings and Discussion

Students described experiences of social and academic integration in each two-year college context. Several colleges were small, located in urban ethnic enclaves, and offered limited programs. Some were huge

downtown public and non-profit private campuses with students who arrived by bus and train to enroll not only in the occupational programs in this study, but also in a wide range of transfer, basic, and continuing education classes seeking everything from one class to workforce certificates to post-baccalaureate degrees. Other colleges, including two of the community colleges and one for-profit, were located in inner-suburbs, where nearly everyone drove to campus. Student stories told of struggle and determination—from the young Puerto Rican single parent who juggled work, school, and childcare to earn a degree to assist an accountant, to the African American man in his late 20s trying to gain a foothold in the primary labor market after years of low-wage jobs by studying computer-aided drafting, to the returning forty-something White mom learning about electronics engineering, to the Indian immigrant hoping to be a radiography assistant, to the Mexican American man wanting to trade in his hard hat for a job designing websites. Remarkably, distinguishable patterns emerged across this diverse sample in how they described feelings of belonging within their college environments and the behaviors that led to their making connections and navigating their institution.

Student perceptions of what helped them integrate were closely linked to institutional actors, or agents, that facilitated the process for them. Given this consistency across institutional type and students' race, class, and SES background, findings lend support to the notion that institutional agents (Stanton-Salazaar, 1997, 2001) and practitioners (Bensimon, 2007) in the form of instructors/faculty, other staff, and students as well, were instrumental in how the two-year students integrated. Although many students noted family support, 92% highlighted a college-specific "agent" or "agents" who were instrumental to their sense of adjustment, comfort, belonging, and competence as college students. A focus on students' subjective perceptions regarding what facilitated their integration process contributes to a better understanding of how their experiences and their perceptions of their experiences may differ substantially from traditional students.

Some sub-group patterns did appear. African Americans were much more likely to explicitly articulate a desire for a cultural or personal connection with an individual or group on campus. Other racial subgroups discussed such connections, but tended to refrain from defining a desire or need for such interpersonal connections. Nearly all students commented equally on their limited time to engage while on-campus, challenging the presumption that younger students have more time to seek traditional forms of campus interaction. Many of these younger students had families of their own, were working to support themselves or "help

out" their families of origin, or were spending quite a bit of time commuting to and from college and maintaining close relationships with and obligations to family members of all kinds.

Patterns that emerged in the data are detailed below and illustrate the potency of social and academic integration processes and how and why they enhance feelings of congruence, even among non-traditional aged, remedial, part-time, working students who may also be parents. Given Manski's (1989) consideration of the tenuousness of community college students' goals, it is not surprising that interviews reveal a link between students' integrative experiences and a reinforcement, strengthening, or refinement of their goals.

Integration During Class Time

Although quantitative measures of integration emphasize frequency of contact with faculty, advisors, and fellow students *outside* of class, feelings of belonging and connection often happen in arenas other than purely out-of-class social interactions. In fact, for the students studied, connections tended to happen during *in-class* interactions. Deanna is a good example of the many students who identified teacher-student and student-student interactions *in the classroom* as important contributors to their sense of comfort in the college environment. Deanna is a traditional-aged Latina attending a private two-year college full-time while working up to 35 hours per week as a receptionist at a real estate office and caring for her young niece for several days each week. While Deanna dismissed college "friends" as unrealistic in her busy life, she identified teacher and student support and approachability *in the classroom* as fundamental to her feelings of social comfort. She pointed to the importance of individual faculty members taking an interest in her academic success as a fundamental reason for why she feels comfortable as a college student.

I really feel comfortable in this school because . . . I realized it was small . . . The teachers . . . pay more attention to . . . your needs, and ask questions . . . I feel comfortable. I really do. I never thought I would, but I feel comfortable. I feel like I could . . . walk in and it's my home, you know? I do feel comfortable. I like it.

Cheryl, a 33 year-old African American housewife, mother and full-time worker from the south side of Chicago enrolled at one of the community colleges part-time, feels similarly.

Cheryl: The classes that I've taken, I feel real comfortable there, and I want to finish . . . It's a real warm feeling . . . I'm very determined to get through . . . Completion is really important for me.

Interviewer: You said there's a warm feeling there. What do you think makes it a warm feeling?

Cheryl: In my experience, the teachers, and the students, 'cause I've been going there for 4 years and it's a lot of students that's in the same predicament that I'm in—working part time. So, you know, it's like a family thing; encouragement.

Interviewer: Can you explain to me what it is about [your instructor] that you like?

Cheryl: Her encouragement. She's just truly an inspiration. You know, an African American woman that's made it—that's encouraging. The way she teaches, she allows . . . students to really express themselves. . . . I was able to express myself. It was a safe place for me. . . . I was just determined and I didn't give up. It was truly a safe and a warm place for me. . . . Truly great.

Approximately three-quarters of the students identified such support and approachability of teachers or other students within the classrooms as fundamental to their feelings of comfort in college. For them, a fear of displaying their inadequacy fed the initial discomfort they experienced in each new college classroom they entered. Many thought instructors or classmates would get frustrated about having to repeat the information or embarrass them publicly for their lack of knowledge. So they tended to act cautiously. As Yared, an African immigrant at a community college put it, "Students are afraid to answer because they don't want to appear stupid." This fear was prominent among native born African American and Latino students of all ages. Attempts by instructors to welcome and solicit student questions in the classroom tended to mitigate such fears and engender feelings of comfort, an important precursor to student commitment to persistence. Maria is a Puerto Rican, divorced, single-parent who dropped out of high school and returned to community college in her early thirties. Although she ended up with mainly As and a member of the college's honor society, her confidence was low upon enrollment. She described the pivotal role played by her instructors' approaches to her during class time, detailing her experience with her English professor:

He took the time to take me aside when I wrote my first paper, which was the first paper I had ever written in my whole life. I had never done it in high school. . . . I was really nervous about handing it in. . . . He started telling everybody their grades . . . calling them out into the hallway. I was really nervous. He grabbed my paper and I went out there. "Oh God, he's going to tell me . . . that it doesn't make sense . . ." and I was really nervous. He just held my hand and said, "You made it real difficult for me to grade your paper. I didn't know what to do with this. I've never gotten a paper like this and it was an A+." He wrote really totally positive comments. He said,

"Don't be afraid of writing just because you're going to make a mistake. You obviously like writing. Keep writing and if you make mistakes, so what?" He took the time. From then on we were pretty close.

However, instructors making the effort to help students overcome their fear without a systematic and effective plan for doing so unfortunately didn't guarantee success. Some students continued to suffer despite the opportunity to get help during class time because they were too timid to exploit the opportunity. Adriana, a Latina who works part-time and cares for her younger sister, is an example:

Interviewer: So now you're finding out the classes are getting a little harder?

Adriana: Yeah . . . actually, there's just one, in what I'm majoring in, Accounting 2. It's getting harder. I really don't understand . . . what's the deal . . . but I try to handle it.

Interviewer: Now what do you do to try? Do you try to get any help, or . . . what do you do?

Adriana: I've never tried getting help from here. I, actually, when I'm at home, when I get my days off, I actually study, those days. It's kind of hard, too, because I have a little sister that I'm taking care of, and it's really noisy, so . . . I feel like if I ask a question . . . and he goes over it, and, like, people already know it, they get frustrated, y'know? It's not their fault that I don't understand. Sometimes that's how I feel. So really I don't ask questions, I try to understand on my own.

Interviewer: Does your teacher ever say it's okay to ask questions?

Adriana: Yeah. He's always, y'know, "Does anybody have questions?" But sometimes I still feel like he's gonna get frustrated or other students are gonna get frustrated, and it's like, I don't want that to happen, y'know, so I really don't ask questions.

In contrast to most quantitative measures of integration that emphasize interactions outside of class, the pronounced importance of in-class experiences makes sense for commuting students. Unfortunately, our lenses for viewing student persistence have not prioritized the classroom, perhaps because most research has focused on large residential universities populated by students with the privilege of living on campus. However, the consistency of the present findings with findings regarding the relevance of classroom dynamics for four-year students supports the notion that such a classroom-centered focus may be more broadly applicable (Braxton et al., 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nora et al., 1996). Regarding two-year college students, Tinto (1997) contributes consistent findings. In a coordinated studies program at one community college, he found classrooms can serve as smaller communi-

ties of learning that provide “a mechanism through which both academic and social involvement arises and student effort is engaged” (p. 615). His findings reveal students’ supportive relationships with peers in class and the learning and engagement that result from the program’s unique approach. However, Tinto is similar to other scholars of persistence, the classroom-centered studies noted above, and to his prior research with two-year college samples (Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994) in his preoccupation with social relationships *outside of the classroom* as the linchpin of integration. Although he does acknowledge that for commuting students, “if academic and social integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom” (Tinto, 1997, p. 559), he nevertheless chooses to center his discussion of his findings on the potential of the classroom to serve as a bridge, or gateway to subsequent academic and social involvement in college communities *external to the classroom*.

In the present study, students enrolled in “regular” classes (not part of any special learning communities) spoke of the approachability of instructors during class time and the feelings of comfort, belonging, and intellectual welcome to learning that it generated. Most students neither expected nor desired that these in-class relationships with instructors and students extend to social communities beyond the classroom. For them, feeling that they could ask questions and ask for assistance in class without being looked upon negatively by their instructor or classmates was enough to combat their fear of not belonging and inspire their drive to persist. For students with limited time, resources, and inclination to seek assistance and support outside of class, a framework that truly centers on the academic experience as the central vehicle of integration is critical. Likely the same time and resource constraints that lead students to choose the two-year college option in the first place also color their integration strategy.

Beyond the Classroom: The Interplay Between the Classroom and the Organizational Context

Organizational structures that limited the accessibility of faculty and instructors had consequences for students who chose particular in-class behaviors. Adrianna’s attempt to do it on her own rather than seeking help after class was in line with her college’s lack of capacity to meet her needs due to the high number of adjunct faculty who were not available for office hours at convenient times. However, this in combination with her ineffective in-class strategies, fueled her subjective feelings about how her academic needs had become incongruent with her ability to gain help with her work, thereby diminishing her confidence in her own persistence. She described her confidence about her ability to finish

when she first enrolled as a 7 or 8 on a scale of 10. However she explained that her rating had become low because “it’s getting harder,” yet she hesitated to seek additional help either in or outside of class and planned to keep to her strategy of studying on her own despite feeling unsure she was “gonna make it”:

Adriana: Everything I can do on my own. Like, I, I don’t mind asking teachers, but, like I said, I don’t want to annoy them either so, I do it more on my own.

Interviewer: Now, are teachers also available, like, after school time, outside of class?

Adriana: They’re really more here, like, in the mornings . . . when I’m in class. So it’s kinda harder to meet up with their schedule, so. . . . It’s really hard, because as soon as I get out of here, there’s times when I have to go straight to work. . . . And I get home around 8:00, like, 9:00, and it’s like, I gotta eat, and go back to sleep ‘cause then I gotta wake up early the next morning.

Given these circumstances, understandings of persistence should center on the particular characteristics of the two-year college student experience, with all of its limitations and potential strengths, including the lack of availability of out-of-classroom opportunities for assistance due to the combination of students’ lives and organizational structures. In the two-year college setting, the diversity of potential interactions within the classroom, the intersection of in-class and out-of-class interactions, and students’ subjective interpretation of those interactions should all be considered as central to a commuting students’ integration process. Further, a one-size-fits-all curricular approach may not be appropriate since both faculty and students vary in their teaching and learning strategies. For instance, Christine, a 20-year-old community college student and child of Korean immigrants feels intimidated “talking out in class” like Adriana, but she has encountered instructors who structure in time inside and outside of class for individual help:

The classes are really small. It’s even smaller than high school. You get more attention and can ask a lot of questions. You can have more private time with professors in class and they’re really open and if I don’t understand stuff I can just go off to them and ask. They’ll be nice to you.

When asked if she visits faculty during their office hours, Christine explained, “It was kind of hard for me to match those times, so I just go up to them after class or before class or leave a note and they usually call me.” Jason is a 22-year-old, African American student who holds three

jobs and reverse transferred from a four-year university and is now at a community college enrolled in remedial English. He was also motivated by the personal access that his English professor gives to her students:

The other schools . . . gave you a syllabus, "These are my office hours. This is my office phone . . . Catch me if you can. If you do catch me, 'Oh I'm busy for the next 2 weeks.'" Here, it's a thing where teachers don't mind. Miss McVeigh, I love the lady for it. You can stay 5 or 10 minutes after class . . . that's *her* free time. Go down to her office, she's on the way out, she says, "Yes, what you need, Hon? OK . . . let me explain that to you." That's a good response because it makes me want to learn more. It makes me want to go to the teacher more. . . . She gives you her home phone number. Wonderful! I applaud that. . . . If I can't catch her, she says "Call me." She's a late night person, 10 or 11:00 pm. . . . I'm out all day. I'm in school. I may go straight to work. I don't get home until 8, or 9 or 10. . . . That's perfect for me.

Samantha is a White, former military, thirty-year-old divorced mother of several kids enrolled at a for-profit college in an electronics and computer technology program. Although similarly lacking in initial academic confidence, Samantha's in-your-face strategy presents a sharp contrast to Adriana and Christine:

Interviewer: Do you feel like your confidence level has changed since you've started here?

Samantha: Yeah, 'cause . . . actually, you know, with me like, goin' to these other colleges, I was like flunkin' . . . not doin' well or whatever, and I'm just like, "maybe I just don't know this stuff." And then I came here and I'm like passin' and doin' good, I'm just like, "I *am* smart." You know, like, "hey, I have it," you know? It's just, I guess the way it's taught to me. My confidence has really been boosted since I started here . . . 'cause if I have a question, I'll ask [the instructor] fifty questions, you know, and he'll be like, "(sighs) . . . you again?" (jokingly) you know, "Yeah, it's me." But I mean, he'll still answer it, you know, he'll take the time.

Given this diversity in students' approaches, it is optimal to identify how two-year students subjectively define and interpret their opportunities for integration *in the classroom* and how access to instructors is defined and organized in formal and informal ways both in class and *as an extension beyond the formal structure of class*. In his study of full-time, four-year college students, Cole (2007) finds "accessibility cues" are enacted within classrooms to signal faculty and students' desire for contact outside of class, and several components of the classroom environment enhance faculty-student interaction and students' intellectual self-concept (p. 276). Although Cole does not employ Tinto's framework, these

components—overtly engaging students and valuing their comments, linking out-of-class events with class content, and allowing students to constructively challenge the professor—can guide further exploration of the value of in-class experiences for the social and academic integration of two-year students as well. The findings of the present study layer onto such in-class experiences, the unique structural constraints of a commuting institution as well as the challenge of students with extremely low academic self-confidence and limited time. The present findings are also consistent with and demonstrate in more detail, how the interconnectedness of social and academic integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Stage, 1989; Tinto et al., 1994) become manifest in two-year college settings. Furthermore, they show that in-classroom dynamics can be a vehicle not just for social, but also academic integration beyond the classroom as well.

*The Nature of Meaningful but Limited Social Integration
with Other Students*

Although students did not prioritize relationships with other students, they did describe dimensions along which such relationships were meaningful. Deanna and Cheryl (above) are good examples of how students developed relationships that did not extend very far beyond the classroom but were meaningful indicators of a positive peer climate for them. Each noted personal and work-related time constraints as an impediment to cultivating friendships with classmates and interacting with other students outside of class. Yet, Cheryl did explain that feelings of “warmth” between students that occur “at school” were important to her. These relationships appear limited in their resemblance to the more social activity-driven nature of friendships more typical among four-year students, particularly given the heavy time investment of such relationships. Quantitative measures of social integration emphasize *purely social* relationships with other students, but the two-year students highlighted the academic dimensions and instrumental quality of these relationships and interactions (in and out of the classroom, but not beyond). Students described limited, yet purposeful interactions with other students. For instance, Deanna relied quite heavily on other students’ answering of her questions “just in class time; not out of class, like when I have a question to ask, and they know, and tell me.” With regard to friendships or social interactions outside of class, she explains:

I really don't . . . have any friends [at this college]. I do talk to some people, but I don't consider them friends, like, close friends. That's not what I'm here for. I'm not here to meet friends. I mean I don't mind, I like

having friends, but I believe it takes time. So, I really . . . I mean, they're nice . . . some people are really nice, and I do talk to them, but I don't consider that really true friends.

Julia, a GED recipient and single parent in her mid-twenties with a seven-year-old, began at a private two-year college part-time in remedial classes while working part-time. She resembles Deanna in her description of how working together with other students was extremely helpful academically and contributed to her positive feelings about the college social climate, despite the fact that these interactions did not extend into the arena of friendship. She was being interviewed in her college's student lounge when she explained the frequent tendency for her and her fellow college-mates to form spontaneous informal study groups:

If I'm in the lounge . . . like right now, and I was studying and someone will be, "Oh, you know what, can you help me?" You know, we'll get together. It's like people see, "Oh you're in that class? What do you do here and what do you do there?" It's pretty much everybody helps each other out. That's what I like. Nobody's like, "Well, you figure it out yourself." Nobody's really mean like that.

Smaller colleges, smaller majors, and programs that clustered students into cohorts that progressed through their program together enhanced students' opportunities for such meaningful contact to occur. The consistency of scheduling and the repetition of students gathering in similar spaces that are often part of smaller, cohort based education provided these additional "social" opportunities for students to interact regarding coursework and larger goals. This was more common among students at the private for-profit and non-profit colleges and among community college students in more cohort-oriented programs in medical and electronics fields. Samantha extolled the benefits of taking classes with the same students from one term to the next: "Yeah, because you kinda know who really knows the stuff and you can get help from them, you know, instead of goin' to somebody new every time." Similarly, however faculty in various departments at community colleges that encouraged students to work together in formal or informal study groups during class time or for short periods outside of class time also encouraged the development of such limited but valuable interactions. For instance, several English instructors at one community college organized students into long term working groups and this facilitated ongoing communication. Jammille, a traditional college-aged, part-time, African American student stated, "I get along with people in the groups, and we help each other out . . . exchange phone numbers. If you have a problem, just call one of them and they can help you out."

Research on Latino university students finds that discussions of course content with other students outside class contributes to a sense of belonging in residential colleges, which is a central component of the social cohesion necessary to engender identification with the college community and combat marginalization (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In the present study, students across the racial/ethnic groups studied found this to be helpful. Jamille is one example of the many African American students who communicated about academic matters with other students outside of class. Students of all other ethnic backgrounds did the same.

That this communication with other students was limited to mostly academic matters was normative, while more involved social relationships were reserved for the neighborhood/community based activities to which students remained attached. When students were asked about groups in which they participated, many described these community-based involvements more prominently than campus social involvements. Natalie is a traditional college-aged African-American enrolled in a non-profit private college graphic design program. When she was asked if she was "involved in any clubs or student groups" she responded by describing her role as a "youth leader" in her church "every other Wednesday, like . . . seven o'clock, eight o'clock." Lou is a single father of a nine-year-old daughter from the Philippines who is a full-time student and part-time worker. He echoed this norm in which a students' primary social/cultural life is off-campus while social interactions on campus revolve around academics:

Interviewer: Do you socialize with other students from school?

Lou: Yeah, a lot.

Interviewer: What kinds of things do you do?

Lou: Mostly school work . . . Sometimes I invite them, like . . . my daughter's birthday . . . all my friends were invited, not only Filipinos, different, cause I have friends from different parts. Whites, everybody.

Interviewer: Do you think you will continue to see these people after you leave school?

Lou: (Nodding) I think I will be seeing the Filipinos more 'cause most of the Filipino friends I have live near our place so we usually see each other a lot. (Shaking his head) My other friends are living (gesturing with his hands) . . . I am here, they are here, and [the for-profit college] is here.

Lou's discussion also highlights a situation common for 70% of the students interviewed. Given the geographic racial segregation of the area, their off-campus cultural/social life was embedded in same-race social groups, whereas their on-campus peer interactions tended to be more racially/ethnically diverse.

Carolyn exemplifies a pattern of networking with “similar” students that occurred for almost 40% of the sample. Carolyn, a White woman, returned to community college part time after 30 years of working and raising her kids. Carolyn’s description of her challenges and associated strategies highlights the infrastructure of supports she relied on when her commitment wavered and she, like so many other students in the sample, doubted her competence. She passionately recalled how important networks among older students were for providing social support along with academic information and strategizing. Her sentiments were similar to students who discussed the benefits of taking part in the formal and informal study groups encouraged by some of their professors:

It’s easy to talk to those students who have the same goals in mind as I do . . . to express our concerns and fears, how hard subjects are. . . . As adult students . . . when you come back into school your study habits may have gone, if you ever had them to begin with. . . . Unless you’re lucky to have support at home . . . it is hard. . . . You can talk to another student and find out you’re not alone and how do they overcome the simple things? . . . How do you cram for a test? What’s the best way to study? What works for you? . . . idea . . . and support, basically understanding when you doubt yourself, your intelligence. . . . You feel as though you can’t make it, you’re not going to make it . . . it’s a horrible feeling. Your husband . . . doesn’t understand or your children can’t understand it as much . . . then there’s no one here . . . there’s no one. It’s a tough feeling. You feel alone. . . . When you find a student that says, “I know what you’re talking about . . . yes I have that same problem,” even if she’s never solved it and you’re still experiencing it, you’re not alone any more.

Carolyn’s experience reveals the multiple struggles students confronted in their attempts to strategize academically, overcome self-doubt, and become stable and grounded in their college student identity. Her interactions with similar students provided the disruption of alienation she needed to persist. Her discussion also revealed the importance of a vital interpersonal element of social integration that is not centered in what we would traditionally think of as involvement in a college “social life” (participating in clubs and organizations, going out with friends, becoming politically active on campus).

Arnold’s interview reveals an aspect of integration that supported goal commitment in a different way. Arnold is a Latino student who delayed his college enrollment for four years, was initially placed in remedial math, and attends college part-time while also working 12-hour shifts 3 days a week at a construction job. Arnold is much closer to a traditional age student than is Carolyn and does not suffer from doubts about his competence. However, he stressed the importance of being able to turn

to fellow students for support while he was on campus. Similar to 41% of the students interviewed, his home environment did not provide the same quality of support. His college peers kept him focused on his goals because they shared his goals and his logic for pursuing them, unlike his family, who did not share his logic or commitment to his postsecondary plans. Although supportive, they had trouble understanding what he was trying to accomplish by going to college when he had already acquired a "good" construction job after high school:

My family and friends are just like, "Arnold is crazy, doing everything. He's doing this, he's doing that, he's busy." . . . When I need support, they're there, but they don't *encourage* me to do this . . . They really haven't had that exposure, so I'm kind of the lone one out there. . . . They would tell me, "You need to go to school," but they weren't really encouraging it too much. It was, "You did OK. You did good," and that was basically it. "Oh, you got a job? OK. You're doing OK."

These findings are consistent with prior research on the importance of social interactions beyond the classroom for marginal and two-year students (Attinasi, 1989; Rendon, 1994; Terenzini et al., 1994), yet they reveal two differences. First, the on-campus interactions defined by students as most important take on a distinctly academic rather than social flavor. Second, off-campus interactions provide an alternative source of same-race social interaction that may mitigate the absence of such interactions on campus. Third, limited interactions with networks of students facing similar challenges can be extremely affirming.

Socio-Academic Integrative Moments and Social Capital

In his attempt to more fully include classrooms as sites of both academic and social integration, Tinto (1997) critiques his own model of persistence, which depicts social and academic systems of colleges as two separate boxes. Instead, he acknowledges "a fuller relationship between these two spheres of activity" more accurately represented as "nested spheres" to better depict the ways "in which social and academic life are interwoven" (p. 619). In fact, such a conceptual distinction between the "academic" and the "social" creates a false dichotomy that obscures the nature of the fused socio-academic encounters that dominate the integration experiences of commuting two-year college students and their subjective understandings of the student-institution interaction. The concept of a "socio-academic integrative moments" can be used to describe opportunities for specific instances of interaction in which components of social and academic integration are simultaneously combined. The word "moment" is used to indicate that such an opportunity can, but does not

necessarily have to, involve formally structured, in-depth, routine, or even frequent interactions. All the students above offer examples of typical socio-academic integrative moments in which the *academic* influence is coupled with elements of *social* integration to provide needed support and enhance feelings of college belonging, college identity, and college competence. Such processes revolve around events, activities, interactions, and relationships reflecting “moments” that combine academically and socially integrative elements.

In addition to providing feelings of attachment and belonging, relationships forged with other students, as well as faculty or counselors, enhanced students’ acquisition of the knowledge to make more effective choices and better strategize their college careers, both academically and procedurally. Embedded within socio-academic integrative moments were components that facilitated information gathering and the construction of specific strategies in a way that resembled both strands of scholarship on the concept of social capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as a set of durable, deliberate, institutionalized relationships and the benefits that accrue to individuals as a result of the existence of such social bonds (Bourdieu, 2001), while Coleman emphasizes the benefits and function of these relationships, particular that of information access and exchange (Coleman, 1988). In other words, in addition to socio-academic integrative moments having *social* benefits (greater feelings of college competence and sense of belonging to the institution, the overcoming initial doubts, and a more solidified sense of their college student identity), these moments also had *informational* benefits.

This suggests an additional social capital dimension to Tinto’s emphasis on integration and normative fit. Socio-academic ties, or relationships, can also be crucial points of information-exchange where students’ strategies for attaining goals are improved. This information access enhances feelings of congruence and a focus on shared goals, especially for students who often begin college with relatively high goals but too little information or support to see those goals to fruition. Relationships and meetings with faculty, counselors, advisors, or other students provide the social capital to strengthen academic knowledge and lend encouragement and needed information about cognitive, behavioral, and procedural strategies for success in class, college, and career. First-generation two-year college students are otherwise not likely to have ready access to this information through their family or peer networks.

Among the two-year college students studied, socio-academic integrative moments occurred both within and outside the classroom as evidenced in the examples above. Interestingly, the fusion of social and academic elements in such relationships was emphasized as being of

critical value, as described in the sections that follow. In contrast, purely social relationships were devalued and even described as unwanted obstacles or distractions. For example, Jennifer, a White 18-year-old in a court reporting program in a private non-profit, works full-time and finds herself enrolled part-time in evening classes with older students where “everyone pretty much lives their own lives.” She sees this as a positive because when she comes to class there are no distractions. “No one is talking about their weekends or about their social lives.” On the other hand, the students welcomed interactions with classmates that were not purely social and tended to define friendliness as students’ willingness to be academically functional for one another. In fact, a majority of those interviewed either expected or were pleasantly surprised by such interactions, defining the absence of them as an unfriendly climate. Samantha, who had been enrolled in two community colleges before persisting at her current for-profit, describes her disdain for an “unfriendly” climate in contrast to a classroom climate in which students help each other out academically.

Other colleges . . . I walk into class, sit down, don’t say nothin’ to nobody, nobody says nothin’ to me, and I’m gone. I used to be like, “gosh, you guys are so unfriendly.” . . . They were more independent. They didn’t really like, depend on someone for help. Even if they had no clue what they were doin’, they would sit there . . . until it was time to go . . . without askin’ for help from your fellow classmates . . . which . . . I believe that’s what we’re here for, to help each other . . . because I might have a way of learning something that would be very easy for you and you might have the same thing.

Note that Samantha’s definition of friendly student relationships did not extend to the expectation that students would socialize outside of class, participate in other campus events or activities together, or develop long-term friendships. These more traditional measures of social integration were not within the realm of expectations for 87% of the students’ interviewed. As described in the section above, limited but meaningful socio-academic interactions comprised the norm of expectations among these students across institutional type. Student-faculty or student-staff socio-academic moments were somewhat similar in that they revolved around the informational benefits, but they also tended to involve the institutional agent taking a proactive personal interest in helping the student in some way.

Pro-Active Guidance and Procedural Agency

Seemingly simple bureaucratic hurdles often confronted students as overwhelming and opaque obstacles. The proactive guidance of faculty

and counselors in overcoming these obstacles cannot be overstated. *Pro-active* faculty and counselors/advisors provide strategic guidance and support for students' adjustment and information access in ways that counteract the alienation that may precede dropout. Greg is a good illustration of the impact of this pro-active guidance noted by more than half the sample.

Greg, a White student, was fearful based on his prior academic non-success as a high school dropout. When asked if he thought he was "college material" prior to his decision to attend college, he responded, "I didn't even know what college material was. I couldn't even imagine." Greg, who started taking community college classes one at a time at the remedial level when he was 19 while working full-time, noted the importance of faculty support as critical to his adjustment: He lacked college knowledge and had miserable experiences with the financial aid office. Feeling procedurally overwhelmed and uninformed, it was mentor relationships with faculty that provided information, inspiration, and "procedural agency." In fact, the proactive assistance of one of his professors was the key factor in Greg's ability to continue full-time toward his associate's degree and transfer plans. Greg uses the words "drew me in" to describe how the actions of a particular faculty member and his growing relationship with that professor not only helped him practically, but also inspired him to become more committed to his educational goals:

Luckily, I had Professor Homewood for an English class. At that time I was trying to secure financial aid. . . . I had gone to the library and looked at the college blue book for scholarships, and I just found the whole thing kind of overwhelming. . . . I had gone to the financial aid department here at the school. . . . It was just such a miserable experience. They couldn't help me at all . . . when I asked the woman about scholarships, she told me that I could apply but I probably wouldn't get them anyway, so why bother . . . I was completely discouraged I thought I was just going to quit school and leave. I went into Professor Homewood's class. He was announcing this . . . scholarship to everybody. I figured, "what the heck, I'll try it." I filled it out, and I got the scholarship! That just gave me a rebirth, so to speak. . . . Once you get it, as long as you maintain at least a 3.0, you will continue to get the scholarship for each semester you're here. . . . So he just did such an amazing thing. . . . That is what really drew me in, his ability to help me find those avenues to get to where I wanted to go.

In the community college context, with its organizational and bureaucratic complexity, the experience of students receiving conflicting or incomplete information is not uncommon (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Having a faculty or other staff member willing to take a proactive role in

enhancing students procedural agency can counteract such misinformation and provide role models for negotiating career and future educational goals. When asked if he had developed any mentor relationships with professors, it became clear just how central such relationships were to Greg's progress in college as he explained the value of the four or more mentor relationships he had developed during his time at the community college:

Definitely, there have been certain professors that I've met here that I've just clicked with and have shared interests with. So that usually leads to conversations of a more personal nature than just academics. That kind of opened a door for me. . . . It starts off in class . . . a professor just recognizes something in you, and you get into a conversation and before you know it. . . . I just truly enjoy that. . . . So I definitely view Professor Homewood as a mentor, among other teachers that do that.

Greg's example includes features of traditional measures of academic integration while also highlighting the pivotal role played by in-class communication in overcoming bureaucratic, procedural hurdles and influencing his college/career identity. For 28% of the students interviewed the social capital role of institutional agents in negotiating procedural obstacles was described as fundamental to their decision to continue because it had implications for their identity. It empowered students to redefine their position from powerless victim to a competent player worthy of attention from "important" faculty and staff. These elements are not highlighted in traditional accounts of academic integration.

Julia shared experiences similar to Greg's financial aid dilemma. Appearing in nearly all the interviews, having to overcome procedural hurdles was quite common. Julia admits, "In the beginning of this whole college process, I didn't know anything." She started out doing "college prep" remedial classes at a private non-profit two-year college and then had some trouble with her financial aid and her course scheduling, "They just really messed up my paperwork." She was placed into all late evening classes, which would have been impossible for her to attend given the fact that she is raising a seven-year old son. She explained, "It was really, really, just. . . . It was a bad experience," and elaborated on her frame of mind: "I wasn't in a good place. I was like, 'I wanna go to college but I don't think I can afford it. . . . I might as well just give it up.' . . . But Marisela . . . she cleared things up for me." Marisela was an admissions counselor at a for-profit two-year college. Julia's younger sister had enrolled there and convinced Julia to come to talk with Marisela. So Julia went with her sister and friend:

My sister actually came here for the paralegal program and she told me they also had a business program and I came and talked to one of the counselors and she just told me everything I needed to hear and just made me feel really comfortable.

Marisela quickly figured out how to process Julia's financial aid and enroll her in a sequence of day classes. Julia's description of her experience stands in sharp contrast to the bureaucratic tangle that many students encounter in their attempts to negotiate their college strategies. In our interviews, it was quite often vital that students access the proactive assistance of a counselor or faculty member in order to provide a way out of the dilemma. This is an example of the kind of integrative "moment" that allowed students to persevere in the face of menacing organizational structures:

I came in and I saw Marisela in Admissions. . . . My sister and myself and Crystal . . . came together. . . . She told us about . . . all kind of different business programs, what we really wanted, what type of classes we were thinking about taking, and she talked to us about the financial part and the loans and the grants and all that kind of stuff. . . . I had already applied for everything at [the other college], so my grant money was just sitting there and all she had to do was transfer it over. So I was just ready to go.

Before slipping through the cracks and simply dropping out of college, Julia got the one on one time with a counselor that she needed to gain crucial information about financial aid and scheduling options in order for her to continue her college enrollment with a full package of financial aid.

Like Greg, Julia is an example of the one-half of all students interviewed who received personalized procedural help and the one-quarter of all students for whom this help was linked to a relationship or set of relationships that bolstered their identity as college students. Ready to lose hope for her college goals after feeling victimized by the financial aid/scheduling snag at the other college, Julia's brief encounter with an admissions counselor who leveraged her knowledge of the system to intervene, put Julia back on a college pathway and procedurally coached her through her first year transition. It was through their relationship that Julia's confidence to make it on her own through college developed. Marisela was the one institutional agent with whom Julia connected and sought assistance:

I know in my second quarter I was like, "I don't even know how to pick classes," and they said "Go see your advisor." Well, I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know who my advisor is!" And [Marisela], . . .

she really helped me a lot . . . she was just an admissions counselor and that really wasn't her job, but . . . she talked to me like I was her good friend . . . so, she was a real good help. . . . Now that I'm totally confident, I know what classes I need and what I should take now. . . . I've totally learned the process, so, I don't really have any problems.

The crucial aspect of these relationships—procedural assistance—is not highlighted in traditional measures of academic or social integration. Many two-year students are marginal in that they are so tenuous in their college student role that seemingly minor setbacks are not interpreted as such and could easily throw them off course and back into a re-adoption of a non-college student identity. Greg was “just going to quit school and leave.” Julia was ready “just give it up.” Maria, in her first semester, constantly thought, “What the hell am I doing here?” It was the help offered to procedurally navigate the institution that emerged as a centerpiece of relationships that solidified their confidence in and commitment to their college student role. Greg described his transformation as a “re-birth.” Rating her confidence on a scale of 1 to 10 Julia said, “When I started, I'd say about a five, but now I'm . . . I'd say about a nine.” Maria, toward the end of her second year as a part-time student, confidently stated, “Now I'm completely turned around and I'm not stopping.”

“Tenuous” students in the sample who did *not* access this assistance chose to depart college.¹⁰ Although the vast majority of African American students interviewed said they experienced no negative treatment in college based on their race, Nikita represents some whose struggles included what they felt was an instructor's racist bias against them. Nikita is from a low-income single-parent family and enrolled in community college after high school. She faced procedural hurdles with financial aid, with accessing tutoring, with a part-time math instructor whose foreign accent caused difficulty, and with this English professor that gave her what she considered an unwarranted failing grade. Despite Nikita's attempts to seek help with these problems from a counselor and others, no one in the institution took a pro-active role in helping. When asked if she had talked to or received any help or encouragement from other faculty, she scoffed, “Oh, no. They didn't really talk about school. They didn't talk about classes. They talked about the lessons they were supposed to teach and that was it.” Failing to access any proactive guidance, she failed math and English and dropped out.

The notions of both social capital and procedural agency resemble the process through which Torres (2006) finds urban commuting students access assistance from mentors, faculty, and other sources who “show them the way” to maneuver through the college environment. Similarly,

in these two-year settings such mentorship, proactive guidance, and information-giving transmit the tools students needed to exert their agency and direct their trajectory.

Close Interpersonal Contact with Faculty

Contact with faculty over academic matters not only can provide needed academic support, it can also enhance feelings of belonging for marginalized students. Hector, a 29 year-old Latino painter who continued to paint part-time while in college full-time, provides a clear illustration of this dynamic. He represents the third of the students interviewed who struggled with a sense of competence and confidence in their college student identity in addition to any informational and procedural hurdles:

Hector: I had no idea of what college was like, except for high school, and that was a joke.

Interviewer: Were you worried about whether you'd be able to perform?

Hector: Definitely . . . I thought the teachers were so smart, and if they didn't think I was college material, they wouldn't pay attention to me. . . . I was afraid to raise my hand in front of everybody. . . . I was insecure. Are they going to pay attention to me if I'm not living up to their standards and my ability? Do they think I'm worth it? . . . Everything was just overwhelming. I got some help though. The teachers have been very helpful. It wasn't all that serious as I made it up to be in my head. I did well in the classes. What I didn't understand came to me with a little bit of work, of course. I was just more overwhelmed because of the amount of work . . . the papers due and all the tests.

Interviewer: How did you get help?

Hector: When I didn't understand something, the teachers took the time to explain it. They were helpful.

Interviewer: Did you use their office hours?

Hector: Yes or ask them in class.

Hector benefited from the kind of faculty attention and proactive assistance in and out of class that disrupted his alienation, allowed him to overcome doubts about whether or not he belonged, and helped him manage his academic struggles and increase his self-confidence. His description reveals contact with faculty over academic matters can have important value beyond the academic—it can enhance feelings of belonging for marginalized students who are vulnerable to such insecurities. Unlike traditional views of integration that emphasize frequency of behaviors, attention to the subjective component of students' experiences highlights the complex and nuanced identity-related psychologi-

cal processes that occur. This imbues faculty-student contact—an objective behavior—with a rich subjective meaning that extends beyond a mere measure of frequency of contact. It provides a relevant contribution to Spady's (1971) neglected psychological dimension of perceived integration. Hector, with the help of instructors, was able to get to a place where he was able to perceive his ability and worthiness to be more in congruence with his experiences.

Shared personal knowledge and “closeness” with instructors also provided integrative elements. Stacey, a White, nearly 30-year-old wife and mother who also started out in remedial classes, runs an at-home daycare with a neighbor while attending night classes. She explained how her networks of support were grounded in the close personal interactions she was able to have with her instructors both in and out of the classroom at the for-profit college she attends. In this respect, she is representative of students who valued the personalized attention of instructors that nurtured their feelings of belonging. In fact, students who were similar to Stacey in this respect often used the language of “friendship”:

My husband started at [another college]. He hated it. There were just so many kids in a lab. There were so many students in a classroom, and it was just so hard to get personalized treatment. Here, my instructors, I love them. They know you by name, they know your family situation, they know where you're coming from, they know what kind of job you have, they tease you about it! They're more like a friend. It's fantastic, I can't imagine going to a school where you're one of hundreds sitting in a lecture hall, and you don't get the personalized treatment. I just, I love it.

This sense of friendship and surrogate family located in instructor-student interactions differs from traditional models in which social, rather than academic, spaces are arenas for cultivating new communities of involvement and long-term friendships. For nearly half of the students, the key component of their relationship with faculty moved beyond the academic to engender feelings of closeness resembling elements of family and friend relationships. Natalie had casual personal relationships with instructors outside of class:

We have pretty good relationships . . . as far as not . . . talking about school, but life in general. So you have that relationship with your professor that'll make you know that they really care whether you succeed or not, and . . . how you're doing personally.

Maria's described her faculty as both friends and family. Of her professors in general, she explained, “they're something else”:

Oh yes, they're my friends, like my English teacher I took for 101 and 102. . . . They've been really really supportive. . . . I have just as many faculty friends as I do students. . . .

I never thought you could really become friends with teachers . . . and seek their advice and actually get on a personal level besides the classes. I like that.

Of one particular professor, she claims a more familial connection:

Sometimes I need advice from him . . . even on a personal level, and he's there. . . . I come from a family of eight and I'm not close at all. . . . So it's important that I have some kind of a family. Wherever I go that I develop a sense of some kind of foundation, and I got it here . . . thank God.

These findings add a layer of qualitative texture to prior research noting the positive influence of establishing mentor relationships with faculty on the intellectual self-concept of students (Cole, 2007). The personal, family-like elements of mentor relationships fed feelings of caring and comfort for some students and relate closely to what prior research suggests regarding how important it is that commuter students perceive an institution's commitment to the welfare of students (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004).

Vehicles for Socio-Academic Integrative Moments

Socio-academic integrative experiences were the predominant vehicles for cultivating the type of integration Tinto (1993) defines as a sense of "competent membership." The most common mechanisms were (a) a range of *in-class* interactions and dynamics, (b) formal or "spontaneous" study groups, (c) social-capital relevant interactions and mentor relationships with trusted faculty or other staff, (d) consistent access to communication with "similar" students (usually facilitated by some form of cohort scheduling that created consistency in the students that interacted with each other from one term to the next, and, to a lesser extent, (e) academically-relevant clubs and activities. These mechanisms helped students strategize academic success by incorporating college into their social identity, planning better, scheduling their time more effectively, and placing limits on their demands outside of school.

Purely social interactions—going places with friends, attending social events, participating in sports—did not emerge as primary mechanisms of social integration. Unlike four-year residential students, such relationships were neither expected nor desired for most of the students interviewed, given the family, work, and other demands facing them as they struggled to prioritize college. However, structures such as cohort

based programming and scheduling enhanced opportunities for students to interact with other students who were facing similar challenges. Such structures were more common in the smaller, private for-profit and non-profit colleges and in community college programs in medical and electronics fields.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study are consistent with previous research showing academic integration to be more significant than social for community college students, with traditional forms of social integration unrelated to persistence (Braxton et al., 2004; Halpin, 1990; Mutter, 1992; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Academic integration appears more salient in this study, rising to prominence amid limited opportunities for social integration, and consistent with recently proposed theories of departure for commuting students (Braxton et al., 2004). However, compartmentalizing two-year college student experiences into distinct social and academic realms may not be useful. Not only did academic integration take a slightly more social form than one would expect based on previous measures, but also, social integration was often characterized by academic utility, and the tight interconnectedness of the two forms of integration often make them indistinguishable in these two-year settings. *Socio-academic* integrative moments were cited most frequently by students across all 14 two-year colleges as precursors to their persistence.

Faculty-student involvement was nuanced and served multiple functions. In-classroom interactions were dominant mechanisms of socio-academic integration, which confirms and extends Tinto's (1997) acknowledgement of the classroom as a site of integration. During class, instructors allowed time for one-on-one communication and assistance and confirmed students' ability, which not only boosted students' academic performance, but also validated their self-worth, sense of competence and belonging, and belief in their ability to succeed. In interactions outside of class, contact with faculty served the same academic support and identity-boosting function, particularly for nontraditional and underserved students. Furthermore, findings identify faculty/instructors as primary sources of social capital both in and out of the classroom, transmitting valuable information to students. Interactions with faculty were discussed by students as more pivotal for social capital transmission than their exchanges with advisors or counselors. The guidance of proactive faculty who extended themselves in an effort to help or inform students afforded students a degree of agency within the organization that allowed them to surmount procedural obstacles.

“Institutional agents” of various sorts were pro-active in supporting these two-year students, and the nature of this support should continue to be explored. Rendon (1994) explains how non-traditional students interpret someone taking an active role in reaching out to them and assisting them as an important precursor to involvement and feeling “validated.” The present study confirms the importance of this process, particularly for the Latino and Korean students, and reveals how such validation can occur through in-class as well as out-of-class interactions and how this process extends beyond academic, personal, and cultural validation to also include an element of procedural assistance as well. Although Rendon (1994) and Rendon et al. (2000) present validation as a more useful and appropriate concept than integration, the two can in fact be viewed as compatible, in that validation can act as a strong integrating force. Maria, Greg, and Hector provide excellent examples of these validating interactions and relationships.

The social capital element of students’ integration experiences emerged as quite important in the study. Students emphasized the valuable informational benefits and enhanced *procedural agency* of socio-academic interactions. These findings are useful for expanding Milem and Berger’s (1997) cycle in which initial student involvement behaviors affect their perceptions, which in turn affect subsequent behavior. Early connections with faculty and others could enhance students’ sense of congruency and make them more likely to seek ways to remain enrolled and successful.

Limited contact between students provided meaningful integrative moments valued not for the depth or length of contact, but for their contribution to a sense of connection from shared experiences and challenges. This finding is similar to what Tinto found in a more formalized learning community—building supportive peer groups is instrumental in helping commuting students integrate into a networked community of peers to ease their transition into college (Tinto, 1997). However, unlike Tinto’s study, being part of a learning community was not necessary for the commuting students in the present study to accomplish this integration. Both formal and spontaneous informal study groups as well as “friendly” casual and limited interactions between students were sufficient to create a sense of comfort, belonging, and information-sharing. Long-term friendships were not expected. These findings also suggest the importance of understanding what students expect from the institution and how they perceive their experiences based on those expectations. In contrast to four-year residential students, two-year students may have very different initial expectations and perceptions of college interactions and relationships that do not fit neatly into the traditional categories.

Overall, this study is consistent with research that finds the interracial interactions of minority students with faculty in and out of class and with other students over academic matters to have a positive relationship with intellectual self-concept (Cole, 2007), grades (Anaya & Cole, 2001), and persistence (Davis, 1991) at predominantly-White four-year institutions. Recognizing the pivotal role of such academically-focused contact in vastly different institutions highlights the opportunity to identify commonalities for marginalized students across different institutional levels with differing compositions of student and faculty diversity. It also supports the challenge to resist desires to dismiss more traditional frameworks for understanding persistence (i.e. Tinto) based on their weaknesses. Rather, integrating the strength of such frameworks with current research on the experiences of marginalized and minority students in different types of postsecondary institutions can be of great value.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

Traditional quantitative measures of social and academic integration may be inadequate to capture the precise means through which two-year students develop feelings of congruence within their institution for several reasons. First, how students experience the subjective aspect of the integration process has been underdeveloped. For example, whether or not an interaction with an instructor occurs within or outside of the classroom or is about academic or non-academic matters may be less important than the meaning that interaction has for a student's academic identity development and the role it plays in their feelings of connection to the institution, their confidence about their college pursuits, or motivation to stay. Attempting to quantify socio-academic moments will force researchers to think more carefully about the link between behaviors and the more subjective components of the integration process—reinforcement of intellectual self concept, or academic identity, and facilitation of feelings of belonging. These elements have not traditionally been incorporated into studies of persistence using Tinto's framework, although the work of Torres (2006) represents a useful attempt to include such subjective measures outside of the Tinto model.

Second, efforts should be made to identify measures (i.e. the vehicles noted above) that reflect fused socio-academic integration experiences and to consider their distinct impact. Operationalizing the two forms of integration separately reinforces a false dichotomy and could be understating the true importance of socio-academic integrative experiences by recognizing only half of their socio-academic function. Traditional ways

of conceptualizing and quantifying integration may be attributing too much importance to purely social or academic interactions if, in fact, *socio-academic* interactions are driving commitment and persistence.

Third, in traditional models, interactions that occur within the classroom (such as those detailed by Cole, 2007) still represent a black box. The meaning of those interactions for enhancing students' procedural agency, engendering feelings of belonging, and inviting connections with faculty and other students outside of class have yet to be quantitatively explored as they relate to integration processes. More detailed studies of exactly how two-year students experience and respond to in-class cues and interactions with faculty and other students should be conducted so that more useful measures can be either developed or effectively borrowed from other frameworks. The same can be said of the often limited but meaningful, validating, and sometimes social-capital rich interactions that occur beyond the formal structure of the classroom.

Recommendations for practice include efforts on the part of two-year institutions to proactively connect students early on with faculty and advisors who can mentor students, affirm their sense of academic competence, and provide procedural agency to help students navigate the institution. Tinto (1998) advocates the construction of learning communities, and the findings of the present study lend support for such efforts. Placing the responsibility with the institutional actors (faculty, counselors, staff, administrators) rather than students, for *proactively* initiating various forms of contact would be more effective, as the present findings and those of Rendon (1994) suggest. Some of the colleges in the study had created systems in which instructors and advisors worked together to monitor student progress—both to identify high achieving students who might need encouragement and to connect with students who missed a certain number of classes or whose grades were dropping. Also, group advising routinely brought counselors in contact with multiple students to increase contact beyond what could be accomplished in one-on-one meetings. These group advisories were vital in facilitating procedural agency, providing topics of discussion along with open ended question-and-answer to reduce the obstacle of students often not knowing what to ask or not aware of what they don't know. In other colleges, key faculty members, advisors, and staff reached out to mentor, advise, and encourage students—to serve as “institutional agents.” Institutions should reduce teaching loads, create incentives, and provide other professional rewards or “credit” to encourage more of such behavior—again, in the classroom as well as beyond the classroom.

Similarly, structuring opportunities for students to interact with each other could enhance integration on that front. Modified cohort models

can create more sustained contact over time, and the use of in-class time to let students get to know each other and work together could also be productive in this regard, even if these opportunities are limited. Online networking might also be considered as a tool to allow students to similar others with shared experiences based on such things as parenting and single parenting, racial/ethnic background, gender, immigrant status, intended major or program of study, etc. Students could join listservs, chat groups, and information-based sites based on these commonalities.

Scholars have also previously recommended ways institutions might try to enhance support from the spouses, life partners, and parents of students (e.g. Braxton et al., 2004, Tinto, 1998). These efforts are important, particularly as the experiences of Carolyn and Arnold reveal in their lack of sufficient support at home, but both students were able to persist due to their ability to recreate supportive relationships on campus with faculty and peers. More investment should be directed to developing institutionally-based “significant others” for students. Torres (2006) explains how commuting students already tend to develop personal support networks that include encouragement from their family and community, but the present findings reveal the importance of those within the institution providing the personal attention needed to help students to both feel competent and confident in their intellectual identity and also learn how to navigate within institution. Ultimately, the success of two-year students is contingent upon how they manage the complex negotiation of their daily lives in and out of college. Prior work has highlighted the importance of the encouragement of significant others in students’ personal lives to enhance persistence (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Nora, 1987; Nora et al., 1990). The present findings highlight the importance of significant others located *within the institution* to fulfill that function in a way that extends well beyond encouragement.

Notes

¹It is important to note that the work of Milem and Berger (1997) and Berger and Milem (1999) acknowledges the broader application of Astin’s model and argues for a modified model of persistence that incorporates conceptual elements from both Tinto and Astin. Such work, however, remains limited to the four-year residential institutions.

²Two-year commuting students can be considered marginalized for several reasons. They attend college at the margins of the traditional college experience, historically constructed as selective and residential and framed by most prior research in this way. They disproportionately include populations historically excluded from higher education and at greatest risk of departing—non-traditional aged, underserved racial minorities, low-income, and first-generation college students.

³Research has also not directly addressed the extent to which community colleges reflect specific campus cultures to which students are expected to assimilate in order to be academically successful. This may be an important area for future research, especially

since, despite the premise that community colleges are more responsive and accommodating to the diverse populations that enroll, they also demand a degree of social know-how to navigating their complex bureaucratic structure.

⁴Social integration is generally measured using variables to capture: participation in school clubs and fine arts activities; sports participation; frequency with which students go places with friends from school; peer group interactions; and informal out-of-class interactions and conversations with college faculty and personnel. For descriptions of social integration and its operationalization see Bers & Smith, 1991; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000; Christie & Dinham, 1991; Flowers, 2006; Mutter, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Sullivan, 1997; Wortman & Napoli, 1996.

⁵Academic integration is generally measured using the following variables: actual or predicted first-year grades; students' sense of their intellectual/academic development; students' perception of faculty concern; frequency of social contact or conversations with faculty and/or advisors about academic or career matters outside of class time; participation in out-of-class study groups; time spent on homework; and enrollment in freshman seminars. For descriptions of academic integration and its operationalization see Braxton, 2000; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Flowers, 2006; Maisto & Tammi, 1991; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983; Stage, 1989; Sullivan, 1997; Terenzini, Pascarella, Theophilides, & Lorang, 1985; Wortman & Napoli, 1996; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997.

⁶Questions were open-ended, giving respondents to the opportunity to elaborate at will. Interviewers probed for details.

⁷Codes included: enrollment choice, enrollment process, difficulties/meeting challenges, program choice, academic performance, curriculum, soft-skills, commitment, belonging, integration, external obligations, time management, decision-making, changes in plans, future education and career plans, job search knowledge, transfer.

⁸For eight interviews, the researchers "check-coded" by first coding alone and then coming together to compare codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), followed by collective meetings to create a more standardized coding process.

⁹This feedback came in the form of reports to each college studied, and more informally, after interviews, students listened to brief summaries of what the interviewer understood the student to be saying. Students had an opportunity to elaborate or correct the interviewer's interpretation (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

¹⁰These students were captured in the sample because they had re-enrolled into a college in the study years later.

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