Academic and Social Integration in Freshman Year Experiences: A Case Study at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Thailand

Preeya Khamcharoen¹, Dr. Adrienne E. Hyle²
1. Ed. D (Applied Educational Studies) Department of languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University
2. Ph. D. College of Education, Oklahoma State University

Abstract

The study explored the needs and experiences of freshman students to determine the congruence between what the institution provided for first-year students in the orientation program and what students needed to survive and succeed academically and socially in their freshman year. The theoretical framework employed as the analytical lens to understand the phenomenon was Tinto’s (1993) model of student college persistence, specially focusing on the concepts of academic and social integration. The data were collected through student focus group interviews, university staff interviews, and document review. The findings revealed that students had both academic and social needs to help them be successful in their freshman year. Regarding academic needs, they needed the knowledge about learning strategies and study skills, tutorial sessions, and assistance from the instructors. Regarding social needs, they needed friends and activities. The direct match between students’ needs and what the university provided in the orientation was that their needs were responded in terms of social needs. In terms of academic needs, what the university provided in the orientation program was beyond student needs. The conclusions were that the concepts of academic and social integration can serve as a valuable framework to understand students’ experiences and success in their freshman year, the qualitative methods were useful and study findings can be used to help improve the orientation program.
Background and Significance of the Problem

Annually, the new students of higher educational institutions are stepping into their new routes that they have chosen to experience and hope to graduate successfully within the required duration of their programs. The fact is that many of those students develop both academically and socially. Success is within their reach. They learn and gain what they hope at the outset of attending an institution of higher education (Commission on Higher Education, 2006; Hauptman, 2007). In the United States, the Department of Labor reported that about 90% of the fastest-growing jobs of the future would require some postsecondary education or training (United States Department of Education, 2007). In Thailand, the number of graduates with bachelor’s degrees in 2006 was 261,663, and the number of new students enrolling in the 2007 academic year was 520,992 in public universities and 84,684 in private institutions (Commission on Higher Education, 2007). Student success is so important that higher education institutions worldwide are putting efforts to help students succeed, especially freshman students. Helping freshmen will increase their chances to succeed, persist until graduation, and become productive citizens of their society.

However, many first year students are not retained in the second year of study in higher education institutions. In response to these numbers, many universities design interventions, including freshman orientation programs, to support first-year students adjust to their new environments and learning successfully so that they might be retained for their second year of study (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) and beyond, going on to great success in their lives. At Prince of Songkla University, from the academic years 2002 to 2007 about 36.4% of freshman students did not return to the university the following year (Planning Division, 2007). As a result, various kinds of interventions including the orientation program have been implemented to encourage freshman students to remain in the institution.

Despite the efforts of intervention programs and freshman orientation, a large number of students still encounter problems. Many first year students cannot adjust themselves appropriately and in a timely way to suit their novel environments, including academic surroundings, social environments, and personal living arrangements. The literature on student success would explain the lack of success of students experiencing orientation programs on a lack of congruence between what the institution expects to provide for first year students in the
orientation program and what students need to survive and succeed in first year learning (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Tinto, 1993; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). There might be a gap or mismatch between the provider’s goals and the receivers’ needs. Tinto (1993) would explain the mismatch in terms of the failure to provide essential components of his model of college student persistence: the individual’s integration into the academic and social systems of the institution. Academic integration involves academic performance and faculty/staff interactions whereas social integration includes extracurricular activities and peer group interactions (see Appendix 1). Tinto posits that an individual who does not gain adequate academic and social integration is likely to depart college. Conversely, if an individual is academically and socially integrated or is equipped with adequate academic and social integration, he or she is likely to persist in the institution.

Objectives

This study focused on providing answers to the following research questions.

1. From the students’ perspectives, what did students need to be successful in their freshman year? Why?
2. From the university’s perspective, what is provided to students through the freshman orientation program that will help them succeed and persist? Why?
3. Through the lens of Tinto’s model of college student persistence (1993), what is the match between student needs and university orientation information and experiences provided?
4. What are other realities about freshman students’ experiences that are revealed?
5. How useful is Tinto’s model of college student persistence (Tinto, 1993) for understanding the phenomenon under review?

Technical Terms

Academic integration involves academic performance and faculty/staff interactions.
Social integration includes extracurricular activities and peer group interactions.

Framework of the study

Tinto’s model of college student persistence (Tinto, 1993) was used as the orienting theoretical framework in this study. Tinto (1993) stresses that students are more likely to depart...
the institution if they fail to integrate themselves academically and socially in the college or university system.

In this study, the concepts of academic and social integration in Tinto’s framework were addressed in two dimensions. Regarding the institution as the provider, the scope of academic integration covered the provision of information relevant to academic experiences such as student handbook with content that was meaningful to new students. Academic integration also included the introduction of resources on campus that promoted and led students to intellectual development and academic performance, specifically the library and computer center. And academic integration included the promotion of responsive and supportive interactions between students and faculty members and staff both formally—inside the classroom or in an academic context, and informally—outside the classroom or in a non-academic context. The scope of social integration covered varied extracurricular activities that promoted peer-group interactions.

Regarding the students, the scope of academic integration covered information related to academic performance and intellectual development, for example, needs, concepts, and behaviors pertinent to studying and learning both inside and outside the classroom, and their interactions with faculty members and staff both formally and informally. Social integration covered information relevant to extracurricular activities and interactions among peers, for instance, participating in activities on campus.

**Research Methodology**

To explore freshmen’s experiences, data from the freshmen were primarily needed. Data from the university staff responsible for activities during the orientation program as well as university documents about the program were also needed since this study was related to what was provided for freshmen. In this study, the researcher employed the concepts of academic and social integration from Tinto’s (1993) model of college student persistence as a theoretical framework.

**Data collection.** The researcher conducted two sets of focus group interviews with 26 student participants from 13 faculties (see Appendix 2). They were representatives of all the academic programs for undergraduates at PSU, Hat Yai campus, the researcher’s study context. They are now (2010) seniors who attended the freshman orientation program in the academic year 2007. The participants were divided into three groups based on their fields of study. In
addition, 11 university staff members responsible for the orientation program were interviewed (see Appendix 3) and documents regarding the orientation program were collected.

Data Analysis. Data from the three sources were categorized into two groups: a group of receivers consisting of data from student participants and a group of providers comprising of data from the university participants and document review. Data in each group were examined to see what pattern emerged. At this stage analysis that involved identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the patterns (Patton, 2002) was employed. Next, the theoretical framework in categorizing the data into academic integration or social integration was used. Then the data from the group of receivers and the group of providers were compared to determine the congruence of what was provided by the university and what was needed by the students.

The findings revealed that the students had both academic and social needs. Regarding academic needs, the majority needed knowledge about learning strategies and studying, special sessions or tutorial sessions, and assistance from the instructors. The social needs of students included having more friends and activities. In the orientation the activities that guided or promoted academic integration included an introduction to the university, to the teaching-learning system at PSU, and how to be prepared for studying in the university. The activities that guided or promoted social integration included group activities, society’s expectations of university students, and a seminar on how to live a student life. Regarding the match between student needs and university orientation information and experiences provided, only one direct match was found. It was under the group of social needs for students and social integration for university: the activity that provided an opportunity for students to make friends and know more friends. For other topics or patterns, indirect matches were found. What students needed and what the university provided were in the same group, academic integration, but the terms used and expectations were different. What the students needed was direct and explicit while what the university provided was vast and rather complicated. Students’ needs were specific while university’s provision of information was broad and general but it still covered the needs. Also, three distinctive realities about freshman students’ experiences in addition to academic and social integration were shown in this study: Relationships between freshman students and the instructors, suggested topics to be included in the orientation program, and what made students persist into the second year at PSU.
Conclusions

Conclusions of the study can be found in three areas.

Theory

In this study the data collected were analyzed through the lens of Tinto’s model of college student persistence (1993) focusing on the two concepts of academic and social integration. Regarding the student perspectives and experiences, the results revealed that students had both academic and social needs. In relation to the data from the university that were analyzed through the same framework, the results also supported the concepts of academic and social integration. In addition, there was a match between what students needed and what the university offered in the orientation program. These results, therefore, helped support the importance of the concepts of academic and social integration for both the institution and the students.

It can be concluded that Tinto’s (1993) concepts are important for understanding student success through the freshman year in this study context. His theory is useful and can serve as a valuable framework for understanding this phenomenon.

Research

This study with a qualitative research design yielded rich data from the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews in addition to relevant document review. The data collected were analyzed and the findings derived were used to answer the research questions. Therefore, through the research methods stated earlier, the knowledge about the needs and experiences of freshman students and about what the university provided in the orientation for the success and persistence of freshman students was found.

It can be concluded that the qualitative methods the researcher used were useful. This research strategy holds promise for further research.

Practice

This study explored the needs and experiences of freshman students to see the congruence between what was offered in the orientation program and what the students needed for success in their freshman year at an institution that organized a new type of orientation program for the first time. Therefore, the results and information pertinent to the orientation program, for example students’ needs, important and useful topics, suggested topics to be
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included in the program, can be used for the improvement of the program.

The institution is working diligently to retain its freshman students. More can be done. Study findings can be used to improve the orientation program by providing new activities and programs that will help students be successful academically and socially.

Implications

Within the scope and findings of this study, the researcher would discuss the following implications.

The first implication is that the university needs to acknowledge and respond to students’ needs. The faster, the better for freshmen. In this case, students’ needs in relation to academic integration included learning strategies, study skills, tutorial sessions, and assistance from the instructors. It is a common phenomenon for freshman students. They need to feel secure in the academic side of their new student life. In the US higher education where the reference of first-year experience is widely recognized, one of first year programs is assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college which is in line with Tinto’s concept of academic integration that “students must possess the requisite academic skills to do college work in order to engage in ongoing academic conversation and to feel validated as a member of the academy” (Barefoot, 2000, p. 17). In Australia, Krause (2005) asserted that students thinking of dropping out are those “who fail to make a smooth adjustment to university, have difficulty understanding course material, feel overwhelmed by all they have to do at university...” (p. 59). Therefore, it is vital for institutions to pay attention to freshman students’ academic needs in an early and timely manner. Otherwise, a number of students who feel insecure in their ability to study at university or who actually face academic problems have a high tendency to drop out.

The second implication is the need to augment peer group interactions. In addition to the orientation program that promotes social integration at the beginning of the academic year, more activities should be organized throughout the academic year to provide opportunities for making friends and augmenting peer group interactions. Peers here cover friends and seniors. Study findings reveal the importance of peers. Students need friends for multi-reasons, to consult with, to study together, and to help one another. Also, for many students, friends help them feel more confident and for the others, because of a group of good, close friends, they persist into the second year at university. The importance of peers in various aspects is in line with Tinto’s concept on social interaction with peers that it is positively linked to the quality of student effort
to learning and persistence (1993). The peer interactions then have an impact on academics.

The third implication is that the university needs to listen to student voices and involve students in planning future orientation activities. Many educators agree that student voices are worth listening to. And for this study, student voices should be heard by the university administrators. The researcher believes that study findings and the information relevant to the orientation program would be useful for the improvement of the program.

The final implication is that the idea of the year-long orientation is worth taking into consideration. When student needs are sought at the beginning of the first semester, they will be useful input for the university to plan the activities or programs throughout the year and arrange or provide resources to serve student needs and to enhance freshman year experiences to be more meaningful and helpful to new students. Hunter (2006) suggested some characteristics of efforts to enhance first-year experience that included the importance of understanding students, changing cultures and the nature of teaching and learning. In addition, extending the orientation or organizing more programs or activities to instill expected habits or necessary skills for freshmen is worth trying because these habits or practices are often sustained throughout college or create the foundation for the rest of their academic career (Schilling & Schilling 1999; Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989).

Furthermore, Schroeder (2003) suggested two web sites with resources on first-year experience: the Policy Center on the first Year of College (www.brevard.edu/fye) and the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (www.sc.edu/fye). With the information on their own students and the knowledge on how to enhance freshman year experiences, the institution will be ready for organizing a variety of activities or programs to help their freshmen to become academically and socially successful. To sum up, study implications focus on student issues that require cooperation from the university administrators and policy makers to take into consideration, plan and put into practice.

Recommendations

Some recommendations are proposed as follows:

First, further research with the same design and theoretical framework can be conducted in other contexts to gain findings or answers for the research questions because this study was an explanatory case study with a qualitative research design and it yielded very useful findings specific to the study context. In other words, the findings were institution-specific.
Second, in the researcher’s view, the strengths of the study can be employed in further research. This study aimed to explore students’ needs and experiences of students in their freshman year and the researcher gained useful information for better understanding freshman students because the qualitative research methods allow the researcher to gain deeper data or information. Also, the researcher employed the concepts of academic and social integration to see the match between what the university provided in the orientation program and what the students needed for success in their freshman year and the concepts are useful for understanding the phenomenon. Therefore, the two concepts can be employed in research about other interventions for students.

Third, exploring the needs of freshmen in different faculties and looking into the differences in student needs across different faculties can be alternatives for future research. Student needs in particular faculties will provide useful input for the faculties to prepare resources, activities, and assistance to serve student needs and will be helpful to freshmen in adjusting to new experiences in the freshman year.

Fourth, a similar study can be conducted with different groups of students. This study focused on the successful students who participated in the orientation program and persisted into the second year. Future research might explore comparisons across those students who participated in the orientation program who were successful, and those who were not. In addition, the study can be about the students who were successful and did not participate in the orientation program.

And finally, a longitudinal study of students’ experiences in higher education can be conducted in the same study context. However, the study design needs some modifications to suit the current context. In the researcher’s view, it would probably be interesting to see the growth of individuals through the lens of the concepts employed in the study as well as the impact of the concepts of academic and social integration on student persistence.

References


Appendix 1

Tinto’s Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure

Appendix 2

The guideline questions for focus group interviews

1. From your perspective, what do you need to be successful at PSU? Academically? Socially? Could you explain why?

2. What did you do to help you feel confident?

3. What did you do to help you succeed in your first year?

4. How satisfied are you with your progress in your program of study?

5. Describe your studying behavior in class and outside class.

6. Describe your relationship with your instructors.

7. How satisfied are you with your out-of-class activities?

8. Describe social or non-academic activities you participated in your freshman year.

9. What kind of relationships did you have with other students?

10. What did you think of the orientation program?

11. What orientation topics were important and useful to you? Why? How did you apply them in your learning and living?

12. What other topics do you think needed to be included in the orientation program? Why?

13. What made you persist to the second year of studying at this institution?

14. What additional information do I need to know about your freshman year that I didn’t ask you about?
Appendix 3

The guideline questions for semi-structured interviews

1. Why did the university initiate and launch 2007 PSU orientation program?
2. How were the activities in the program designed and selected?
3. From your perspective, how useful were activities in the program to new students?
   How do you know this?
4. What does the university expect from students who attended the orientation program?
5. What is your overall opinion about the orientation program?
6. What additional information do I need to know about the orientation program that I didn’t ask you about?