

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

### Reflections on Tinto's South Africa lectures

Laura W. Perna\*

Providing reflections on Prof. Vincent Tinto's South Africa lectures is an incredible honour. Like countless other scholars and practitioners in the field of higher education administration, I have long relied on Tinto's work to provide a foundation for my own efforts to understand how to improve students' college-related outcomes. In his first lecture, Tinto reflects on the "flash of recognition" that occurred when he learned about Durkheim's theory of suicide. Similarly, I vividly remember reading the second edition of his book, *Leaving College* (University of Chicago Press), in my apartment in Ann Arbor when I was a doctoral student at the University of Michigan. The way that he used theory to inform his conceptual model of student departure was incredibly helpful to me, as I worked to understand how to conceptualise my dissertation study of the predictors of the choice of college that students attend. I am one of the many thousands who have cited this book – as well as many of Tinto's other incredibly useful publications – over the course of my career.

Through several decades of relevant and timely scholarship, Tinto has certainly defined the way that we, as a community of higher education practitioners, policy-makers and researchers, think about how to promote college student success. The impact of his work on higher education policy, practice and research cannot be understated.

Drawing on this body of scholarship, Tinto's four lectures offer many useful insights. In this essay, I first reflect on the theoretical and practical importance of Tinto's insights. I then summarise the three lessons that Tinto offers and pull from a recent study of the role of state policies in improving student outcomes to offer additional perspective on these lessons. I conclude with a brief statement about the benefits of cross-national examinations of a common question: How do we promote college student success?

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\* James S. Riepe Professor, University of Pennsylvania, USA. Email: [lperna@gse.upenn.edu](mailto:lperna@gse.upenn.edu)

### *Theoretical and practical importance of Tinto's insights*

Tinto's insights are useful to higher education policy-makers, practitioners and researchers because of their theoretical grounding, explicit connections to practice, and relevance to one of the most pressing issues facing higher education. Tinto's insights are derived from a theoretically-grounded understanding of the processes that produce college student success. As Tinto notes, theory provides an underlying explanation for student behaviours and why particular policies, programmes and practices influence college student success. Tinto's scholarship – scholarship that was developed primarily to understand the success of college students in the United States – is relevant to understanding college student success in South Africa (and other nations) because it is theoretically grounded. It is this theoretical grounding that permits the transferability of findings across national contexts.

Second, with his focus on identifying actions that higher education institutions can take to improve college students' success, Tinto's scholarship has tremendous practical value. He stresses that we – as higher education policy-makers, practitioners and researchers – have an obligation to improve college student success, given the many benefits of higher education for students and our societies. He also urges institutions not to “blame the victim”, but instead to recognise the ways that an institution's structures and systems “shape the success of its own students”. Tinto appropriately recognises that “more effort is required” to improve college student success, as too many students are not succeeding. There are clearly many “decisions and actions” that we can take to change institutional structures and systems and, consequently, improve students' college-related experiences and outcomes. Tinto urges us to make these decisions and take these actions.

Third, Tinto's scholarship is important because it centres on addressing one of the most pressing questions facing higher education in nations across the globe: How can we improve college student success? A review of the many benefits of higher education underscores the importance of addressing this question. With higher levels of education come countless benefits for both individuals and the societies in which they live. But, in the United States, educational attainment has stagnated and too many students who enter college do not finish. On average, only 58.8% of first-time, full-time students who entered a four-year college or university in the US in 2005 completed a bachelor's degree within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). Completion rates vary considerably across different types of higher education institutions in the US, ranging from 31% at four-year institutions with open admission policies to 88% at selective four-year institutions (defined here as institutions that admit fewer than 25% of all applicants). Only 31% of first-time, full-time students who entered a two-year institution in 2008 seeking a certificate or degree successfully completed a certificate or degree within 150% of the expected time (three years for an associate's degree). These low completion rates represent substantial inefficiencies in the higher education system and translate into considerable costs in time and money to students.

Students who enrol in college but do not complete a degree lose the time and money that they invested in trying to obtain a degree and fail to realise the many benefits

that come with degree completion, including a higher-paying job, lower likelihood of employment and poverty, and better working conditions. Many of these students also have loan debt to repay. In 2011–2012, 53% of first-time, full-time undergraduate students attending public four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. received student loans (along with 63% of those attending private not-for-profit institutions and 83% of those attending private for-profit institutions) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). In the fourth quarter of 2012, 60% of those with outstanding education debt in the US had balances of US\$10 000 or higher; 30% owed at least \$25,000 and 4% owed at least US\$100 000 (College Board, 2013). Students who successfully complete their degree programmes are more likely to obtain jobs that pay salaries sufficient to enable loan repayment.

### *Tinto's three lessons for improving student success*

In the four lectures, Tinto draws from his scholarship to identify three lessons that should inform institutional actions for improving college students' success:

1. Colleges and universities must provide students with not only the opportunity to enrol, but also the academic, financial, and social supports that they require to complete their educational programme;
2. To promote student success, colleges and universities must ensure that students have the opportunity to engage in high-quality classroom experiences; and
3. Improvements in college student success will “not arise by chance”.

Tinto's first lesson appropriately recognises that promoting college student success requires more than enrolling students; higher education institutions must also provide the supports that students need to persist and progress to degree completion. Clearly, college student success is the result of a longitudinal process that is influenced by multiple forces and factors. Tinto offers poignant examples to illustrate the advising and academic support that students from different backgrounds often require.

Tinto's second lesson stresses the centrality of teaching and learning to college student success. Although “success” is typically measured by degree completion, Tinto argues that what really matters to an individual's future economic and social well-being is learning. As such, he stresses the responsibility of faculty for promoting student success. He recommends that faculty promote learning by obtaining early assessments of student progress and by using these assessments to identify and provide appropriate learning supports, as well as by adopting pedagogical practices that actively engage students in learning.

Tinto's third lesson stresses that creating meaningful improvements in college student success requires an intentional, structured, systematic and coordinated approach. He argues that, at the foundation of any effort to improve college student success, must be clearly-defined institutional goals that are shared by key stakeholders, collection and use of data to monitor institutional progress toward achieving those goals, dedication of resources required for goal achievement, careful attention to implementation of programmes designed to advance institutional goals, passage of sufficient time to allow programme outcomes to be realised, and efforts to scale up successful programmes to serve larger segments of the

population. To promote college student success, higher education institutions must establish student success as a goal and then identify and implement strategies for intentionally and systematically achieving this goal.

### *Insights from a study of the role of state policy in promoting college student success*

Tinto's lessons focus on what higher education institutions can and should do to promote college student success. This focus is appropriate, as higher education institutions have the most direct responsibility for improving college student success. Also important but recognised only in passing in these lectures is the public's responsibility – as manifest by the ways that the national and/or state government limits and promotes the opportunity for students to enrol and succeed in college. What higher education institutions can and should do to promote college student success is often mediated by public policies created and implemented by national, regional, state and/or local governments. While Tinto characterises a university as “the system” that influences college student success, the configuration and operation of this system is shaped by public policies established by government agencies and the actions of other stakeholders (e.g., foundations, philanthropic organisations, businesses and employers).

In the United States, the federal government influences college student success primarily through its authorisation and funding of several large student financial aid programmes (e.g., the federal Pell grant programme). In the United States, state governments also play a noteworthy role in promoting the educational attainment of their populations. Each US state has its own configuration of higher education institutions and its own structures for governing and coordinating its institutions. Each state has also developed its own policies for promoting higher education attainment.

In *The Attainment Agenda: State Policy Leadership in Higher Education*, Joni Finney and I draw from case studies of five states (Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Texas and Washington) to identify five cross-state conclusions about the ways that state policies influence higher education attainment. These cross-state conclusions have important parallels to Tinto's three lessons and productively enhance understanding of his three lessons.

#### **1. Improving student success requires a comprehensive approach and leadership**

Professor Tinto emphasises that there is “no magic cure” for improving college student success. With his attention to bridging academic silos and urging coordination between faculty/academic affairs and support affairs, he recognises the importance of a comprehensive and intentional approach to improving student success. Reflecting a similar orientation, Joni and I argue that there is “no silver bullet” that state policy-makers can adopt to improve higher education attainment or close gaps in degree attainment across groups. The challenges that limit college student success are too many, too complex, and too varied to be simply addressed with just one particular type of public policy (or institutional practice). To create meaningful improvements in college student success, we need a comprehensive approach that recognises the multiple forces that play a role.

Like Tinto, our cross-state model also highlights the importance of leadership for improving college success and, consequently, raising overall higher educational attainment. States and institutions have many policies and practices in place that may be related to college student outcomes. Making meaningful improvements in college student success, however, requires more than having a collection of policies and practices. Instead, these policies and practices must be orientated toward providing a comprehensive approach to addressing a goal that is shared by key stakeholders: improving success of all college students.

## **2. Improving student success requires attention to the context**

In our study, Joni and I found considerable differences among the five study states, not only in terms of current and past higher education attainment, but also in terms of many other dimensions, including a state's demographic, historical, economic and political characteristics. Because of these and other contextual differences, it is difficult to simply apply lessons about the effectiveness of particular policies across states. Any effort to improve higher education attainment must recognise the characteristics of the state context in which the policy is being implemented.

As institutions seek to respond to Tinto's first lesson (and address the full range of supports needed to promote college student success), they should also consider the role of the relevant context. To identify the types of needed supports, a higher education institution should consider the demographic and academic characteristics of enrolled students, the forces that limit the academic progress and persistence of different groups of students at the institution, and the institutional resources available for providing necessary supports.

As Tinto notes, today's college students are increasingly diverse in backgrounds, goals, needs and life circumstances. At many higher education institutions, most students are not "traditional" – that is, transitioning into higher education immediately from high or secondary school and attending higher education full-time and with financial support from their parents. As illustrated elsewhere (see Perna, 2010), "non-traditional" students – particularly students who are older, working full-time, and/or supporting a family of their own – will need different types of supports if they are to make satisfactory academic progress and complete their degree programme.

Higher education institutions should also consider their particular characteristics when considering how best to address Tinto's call for institutions to encourage faculty to use more effective pedagogical practices. In the US, increasing numbers of faculty are employed in adjunct positions rather than in full-time, tenure-stream positions. For instance, just 50% of all faculty in degree-granting institutions were employed full-time in 2011, down from 65% two decades earlier (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). Even among full-time instructional staff, just 67% held "traditional" academic ranks of full, associate or assistant in 2011. Higher education institutions should consider the implications of faculty's employment status for the nature of teaching and learning on campus and the implementation and delivery of any intervention designed to improve pedagogical practices.

Clearly there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach for providing the supports that students need to succeed, given the diversity of higher education institutions and the students they serve. A higher education institution’s approach must be tailored to reflect its institution-specific characteristics. What works at my current institution, a highly selective, research-intensive university enrolling primarily traditional-age students who receive rigorous academic preparation prior to entering and with a large percentage of faculty who are employed full-time in the tenure-stream, will be unlikely to “work” at other institutions (even institutions in the same state and metropolitan area) that enrol students with lower levels of academic readiness for college, fewer financial resources from their families, and different patterns of attendance, and who have other different institutional characteristics.

### **3. Improving college student success requires public policies that are targeted toward addressing the primary forces that limit higher education attainment**

Prof. Tinto stresses the need for higher education institutions to provide the academic, financial and social support services that students need to promote academic progress and persistence. Along the same lines, Joni and I identify from our cross-state analyses three categories of state policies that promote the educational attainment of their populations. Each of these categories of policies has implications for the types of support that institutions can and should provide.

One category of state policies that influence higher education attainment, as well as the necessary institutional actions required to promote college student success, pertains to policies that ensure that students can move between educational entities without loss of academic credit. In the US many students who seek to transition from secondary school to post-secondary education are not adequately academically prepared for college-level work. These students are often required to participate in “remedial” or developmental coursework prior to entering college-level coursework. In 2007/2008, 24% of all first-year undergraduates attending public two-year institutions took at least one remedial course, along with 21% of all first-year undergraduates at public four-year institutions and 15% of all first-year undergraduates at private not-for-profit four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b). Many students in the US also experience loss of academic credit as they endeavour to transfer from one higher education institution to another. Even in US states that have made some progress toward creating state-wide transfer policies, higher education institutions continue to have discretion about whether to grant academic credit for coursework completed at another higher education. The failure of state policy to ensure the smooth movement of students between educational institutions and sectors has important implications for the types of support that higher education institutions must provide.

A second category of policies that influence college student success pertains to policies that determine college affordability. In the US college affordability is determined by three fiscal policies: state appropriations (primarily to public colleges and universities but in some states to private colleges and universities as well); tuition; and student financial aid. In recent years, state appropriations to institutions per student have declined and many institutions

have responded by raising tuition. Institutions often have responsibility for deciding the amount of tuition and fees to charge to students. While financial aid is provided by the federal and state governments in the US, many colleges and universities also allocate institutional funds to providing student financial aid. Institutions make decisions about the amounts and forms of financial aid to award to students (e.g., grants, loans, work-study). Institutional decisions about tuition and financial aid influence the ability of students to enrol in higher education, stay enrolled until degree completion, and engage in coursework and other academic experiences directly and indirectly. For instance, students who engage in considerable amounts of paid employment while also taking classes - in order to pay tuition and other bills - necessarily have less time available to devote to their coursework (Perna, 2010).

A third category of policies influencing college student success pertains to the mechanisms a state uses to ensure the availability of high-quality higher education options. All five of our study states were struggling to meet educational needs within their own borders. Few states have enough money to meet educational needs by building new campuses. Some states are seeking to expand educational opportunity by allowing community colleges (public two-year institutions) to offer bachelor's degrees. Others are exploring the utility of online and distance education. The strategies that a state uses to expand the availability of higher education may have important implications for the strategies a higher education institution adopts to support the academic progress and persistence of its students.

#### **4. Improving college student success requires orienting public policies toward improving equity in outcomes across groups**

A fourth conclusion in *The Attainment Agenda* (Perna & Finney, 2014) is that state policies must be orientated toward closing the many gaps in educational attainment that persist across groups. Attention only to the average level of "college student success" at the institutional or state level masks tremendous variation in educational outcomes based on an individual's family income, race/ethnicity and parents' education, as well as the region, state and locality in which an individual lives. Higher education is believed to promote upward social and economic mobility, but variations in degree completion rates across demographic groups suggest unequal opportunity to realise these benefits. In the United States, educational attainment continues to be substantially lower for students from the lowest- than the highest-income families, students who are Black and Hispanic than for students who are white, and students who are the first in their families to attend college than for students whose parents have attended and completed college.

If we are to make meaningful progress in closing these gaps, public policies and institutional programmes and practices must be orientated toward leveling the playing field and ensuring equal opportunity to fully participate in and benefit from higher education. When state policies and institutional practices do not address the academic, financial and social issues that limit college student success, students with the most need for these supports are typically disproportionately negatively affected.

### **5. Improving college student success requires systematic collection and use of data and research**

A final conclusion from *The Attainment Agenda* (Perna & Finney, 2014) is that states need to collect and use data to monitor progress toward achieving targeted goals and identify necessary adjustments. Tinto also stresses the role of data in constructing a deliberate institutional approach to promoting student success. Many types and forms of data are increasingly collected and available from many sources. The challenge is for states and higher education institutions to ensure that the data that is collected enables state and institutional decision-makers to assess progress toward achieving targeted student success goals and determine the effectiveness of the policies and programmes that have been implemented to achieve the goals. States and institutions must collect data to assess the effectiveness of various strategies and interventions for different groups of students and use the results of these analyses to identify needed modifications in policies, programmes and practices.

### **Benefits of cross-national examinations of how to promote college student success**

Over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to expand my scholarship beyond considering higher education in the US to study higher education in several other nations, including Ireland, Hungary and Kazakhstan. Needless to say, these nations differ from the US and other nations in many ways. Each nation has its own unique system of higher education and structures for governing its system. Each also has particular historical, demographic, political and economic characteristics. These and other contextual characteristics influence the nature of the college student success “problem” that must be addressed, as well as the particular public policies and institutional programmes and practices that may be realistically adopted.

Even with the many different contextual variations, I have been struck by the remarkable similarity across nations in the types of questions being asked about higher education. Government officials and higher education leaders across the globe are seeking to answer the question: How can we best promote college student success? Leaders in many nations are also seeking answers to other fundamental questions, including: Who gets access to what kinds of higher education opportunities? Who should pay the costs of higher education? How can new and emerging technologies be used to improve teaching and learning, promote effective delivery of support services, and reduce the costs of higher education? Who (faculty, administrators, government officials) makes what types of decisions about higher education institutions and their operations? What is the appropriate balance between institutional autonomy and accountability to the government? How should curricula be structured to promote degree completion and workforce readiness? What types of education and training are required for national economic competitiveness?

Tinto notes in his first lecture that his insights are informed by his experience working with more than 400 higher education institutions in nations on three continents. Considering how other nations answer fundamental questions facing higher education has also greatly improved my knowledge and understanding of how to address these questions

within particular national and institutional contexts. While South African higher education institutions may learn from Tinto's critical insights and outstanding body of scholarship, policy-makers, practitioners, and scholars in the US and other nations would also benefit from a greater understanding of how institutions in South Africa are determining how to improve college student success as we (as a global community) seek to address shared fundamental questions.

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