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Non-Traditional Student Attrition in Higher Education: A Theoretical Model of Separation, Disengagement then Dropout.

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This paper addresses a theoretical model that both synthesises and extends the features of the acclaimed Student Integration (Tinto, 1982), and the Student Attrition (Bean, 1980) and the Conceptual Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition (Bean, 1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985) models in order to theorise the causes of attrition specifically for the non-traditional student in higher education in the Australian environment. The literature strongly suggests that non-persistence behaviour occurs at various critical points throughout the student career. For the non-traditional student in technical and further education, the critical attrition point that accounts for the largest single episode of attrition is the first 6 to 8 weeks of the new student study program (Kambouri & Francis, 1994; Malicky & Norman, 1994; Quigley, 1995; White & Mosely, 1995). The Theoretical Model of Non-traditional Student Attrition (Wylie, 2004) proposes that non-persistence decisions are a short-term cyclic process, where a student's poor adjustments in academic and social self-worth results in a re-evaluation of and separation from their course participation. On each occasion that the academic and social self-concepts of the student are negatively impacted, further re-evaluation of their participation in the course occurs in conjunction with the increase in separation behaviour patterns (i.e. sporadic attendance patterns). The process is theorised to be spiralling in nature and continues until disengagement from the study commitment is reached.

Introduction

This paper attempts to incite new directions in attrition research by presenting a recently developed conceptual model of student attrition. Referred to as the Theoretical Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition (Wylie, 2004), the model discounts many of the demographic, background and personal circumstance variables of the student as factors that contribute to non-persistence due to the paradoxical results that typically appear in higher education attrition literature. Other past theoretical assertions have identified attrition to be the result of a failed interaction between the student and the institution, and despite significant attempts at intervention throughout the many decades of attrition research, non-persistence rates reported in U.S. college and university studies have continued to remain consistently high.

In this paper, a brief overview of student attrition in higher education is firstly presented with attention drawn to the parallels that exist between the U.S. and Australian situations. Because the conceptual model presented for discussion focuses specifically on the circumstances of the non-traditional student, the characteristics and factors often attributed to non-persistence for this population are examined. Discussion then outlines the features that both synthesise and extend the established theoretical models in order to theorise the causes of attrition specifically in the New South Wales Technical and Further Education (TAFE) environment

Background

According to Tinto (1982), after more than 80 years of attrition research in higher education in the U.S. and despite the investment of billions of dollars in educational programs designed to enhance the likelihood that individuals would enter and persist within the higher education system, student completion rates have remained constant at around 45%. At around the same time, Pantages and Creedon (1978) indicated that for every ten students who enter a four year college course in the United States, only four will graduate from that college four years later. More recently, Quigley (1995) reported attrition rates of between 60% and 70% for adult basic education students. Even with extensive qualification of those to be included in attrition rates, similar outcomes have been found for student retention in the 21st Century. Only 45% of two-year college first-time students who attended for the purpose of attaining a degree or certificate graduated in the period

1998-2001, and that 32% of students failed to return to college for the second semester or enrol in another institution of higher education (Southern Regional Education Board, 2003). Although TAFE NSW does not report course completion rates (reporting only module completion rates), a plethora of Australian researchers (e.g. Streckfuss & Waters, 1990; Duball & Baker, 1990; Abbott-Chapman, Hughes & Wyld, 1992) indicate a parallel between the Australian higher education environment and the U.S. regarding attrition rates (see Wylie, 2004 for a more detailed discussion).

Recent research into student attrition rates has identified that the majority of students in higher education are now non-traditional (i.e. between the ages of 25 and 60, working in a part- or full-time capacity, and attending a non-residential college facility to undertake a part-time study program). For example, in 2002 the major provider of technical and further education (TAFE) in New South Wales, Australia, reported that almost 300,000 students who had registered their enrolment were over the age of 25 years, and that over 87% of enrolments were for part-time studies (*Statistics Newsletter: Enrolment Summary 1999-2001, 2002*). Furthermore, Streckfuss and Waters (1990) have reported that the mature-age student entering higher education has typically not studied in the previous ten years before undertaking the course. Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) suggest that this long period of absence from study is precisely why higher education should be thought of differently for mature-age students. In support of this position they argue that in contrast to traditional students, mature-age students have diverse characteristics, a vast range of life circumstances, more and varied past experiences, are more concerned with practical application, and have greater self-determination and acceptance of responsibility. All of which, according to Kerka (1989), results in the student role becoming a secondary activity for mature-age part-time students which contributes to higher rates of attrition.

Early research into attrition rates in higher education was underpinned by the notion that the reason for a student dropping out lay in some quality or combination of qualities in the student. As a consequence, much of past attrition research has been concentrated to individual or single sets of variables that characterise the circumstances of the student and their relation to non-persistence. Issues typical of past investigations into attrition include student-oriented issues (e.g. employment demands, family responsibilities); institution-related factors (e.g. faculty-student interactions, provision of student facilities and services, administration and instructional processes, curriculum) and student perceptions relating to issues such as course utility, improved professional status, and psychological stress. However, despite the breadth of attrition investigations, the most consistent aspect of attrition studies is the absence of a strong theoretical framework to underpin research (Hisada, 1988). Only during the last two decades have some attrition researchers undertaken their investigations from strong theoretical bases, typically utilising the theoretical models developed by the prominent attrition theorists Vincent Tinto and John P. Bean.

Established Theoretical Models

Prior to the development of the Tinto and Bean models, most attrition research had explored a myriad individual student variables in relation to persistence but did little to tie them together conceptually (Stage, 1988). Two theoretical models formed the framework on which the present theoretical model of non-traditional student attrition in higher education was developed, namely the Student Integration Model by Vincent Tinto (1975), and the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980) and subsequent Conceptual Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition by Bean and Metzner (1985). This section of the paper firstly describes the main features for each of these models. Discussion then examines the critical points of attrition typically overlooked in this area of research together with the theoretical postulates that have been identified as limitations in past research.

The Tinto and Bean Models of Student Attrition

Tinto's (1975) Theoretical Model of Student Integration postulates that successful academic and social integration of the student into the higher education institution determines persistence behaviour. Although the model considers the attributes, skills, abilities, commitments, and value orientations of entering students, its major

focus is “the impact that the institution itself has, in both its formal and informal manifestations, on the withdrawal behaviours of its own students” (Tinto, 1982, p. 688). Bean’s (1980; 1982; see also Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987) Conceptual Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition posits that non-persistence results primarily from the effects of specific interactions between variables comprised by the model, where less emphasis is placed on the institutional integration of the student due to the characteristics of part-time study, and focuses more on the interaction of academic and environmental variables (e.g. academic advising, outside encouragement), and academic and psychological variables (e.g. study habits, stress).

Critical Attrition Points

A feature common to the Tinto and Bean models is that persistence studies should be longitudinal (Wortman & Napoli, 1996). Their models assume a long-term association between the student and the institution (generally for the duration of the first or freshman year as a minimum), where changes in student characteristics that occur during student interaction with the institutional environment influence the decision whether or not to persist. It is suggested that research designs which precisely follow the established models in this regard may in fact impose limitations regarding research applications investigating the earlier critical points occurring in attrition. The current model for discussion (see Figure 1) deviates from the longitudinal model designs in that it specifically investigates the attrition episode that accounts for the largest number of student dropouts—the first term in the new student’s program of study. Outcomes reported in many longitudinal studies generally do not investigate the idiosyncrasies of first term persistence, but more typically consider this data as part of a first semester or first year study.

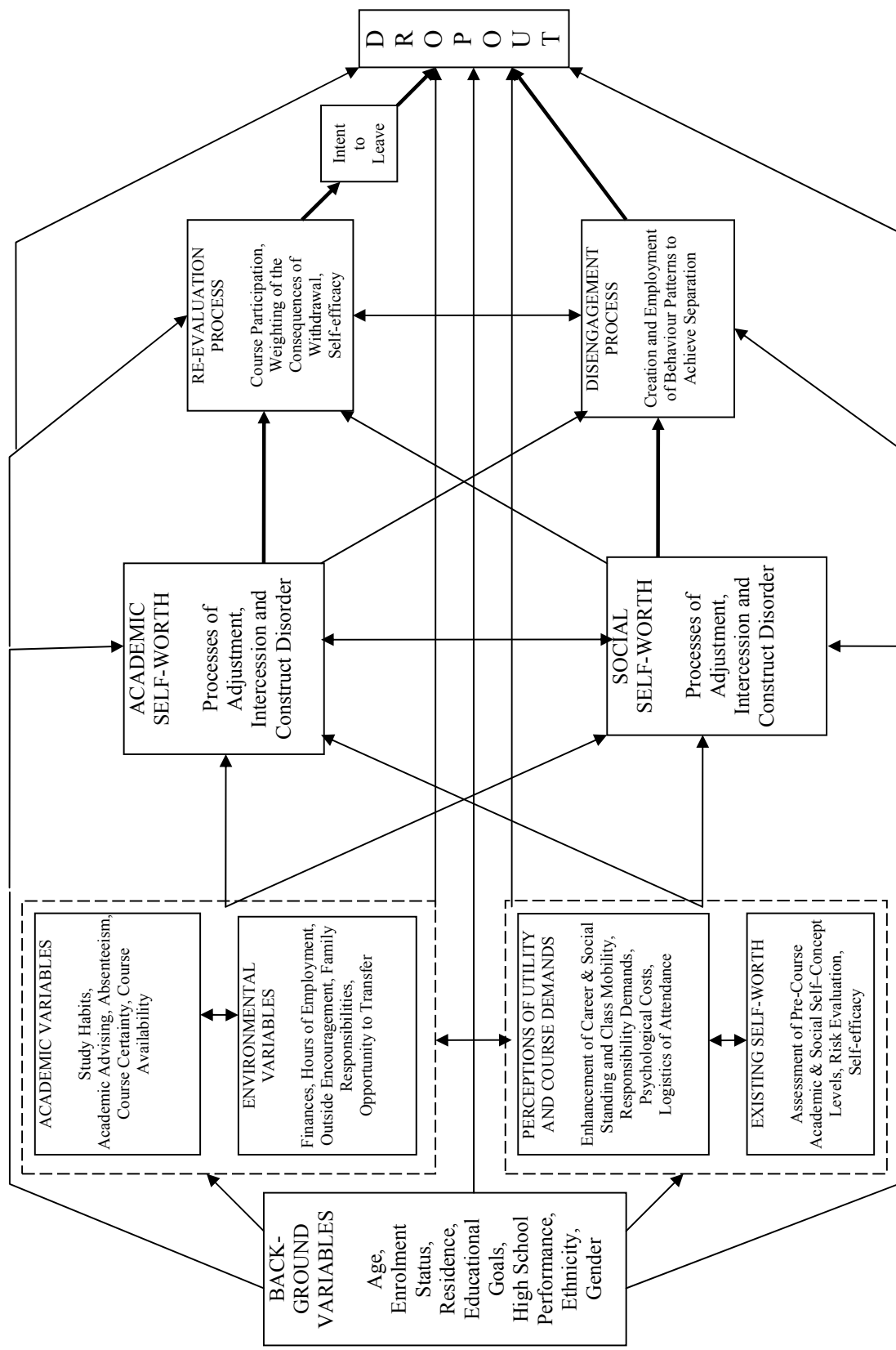
Numerous researchers have been criticised for their use of the Tinto and Bean attrition models, particularly in relation to their tendency to generalise students’ needs and experiences across diverse higher education environments without any evidence to make such generalisations (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; McInnis, James & McNaught, 1995; Williams, 1982). However, both major theorists purport that theory guides research in determining what variables should be studied and how they relate to what the research is attempting to explain, and suggest that the ongoing development of their models is a crucial feature of the theoretical base on which they were developed.

Limitations of Existing Models

An unfortunate limitation in the application of theoretical models, according to Tinto (1986), is that most tend to remain independent of each other without reference to the combined or interactive effect of student, institutional and other factors on persistence. To demonstrate, Astin (1993, p. 398) proposes that peer group interaction promoting student involvement in the institution is “the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years”. The author defines student involvement to comprise the following four criteria: the student devotes considerable energy to studying; the student spends a lot of time on campus; the student participates actively in student organizations; and the student interacts frequently with faculty members and other students (Astin, 1993; 1985). According to Pacheco (1994), the criteria outlined by Astin (1993; 1985) also figure significantly into the academic and social integration features of the Tinto (1975) model of student attrition. The notion of student involvement however, serves to highlight the distinctive characteristics and circumstances of the traditional-age full-time student to that of the non-traditional mature-age student, who is typically a working student “with little available free-time and a sometimes discomfoting feeling about the cultural and class milieu of the university to stick around and get properly integrated” (Pacheco, 1994, p. 54). In support of these contentions, the words of a teacher colleague may help to clarify the perceptions held by those who are most likely to know. In response to a survey that asked teacher participants to identify any differences in the student characteristics of full- and part-time students regarding academic and social integration, a teacher provided the following comments:

Adult learners are not typically between the ages of 17 and 21 years, but between 25 and 55 years. They are not attending full-time classes; they attend part-time classes generally because

Figure 1 Theoretical Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition



they work during the day. They do not receive supporting allowances via government benefits; they are required to earn their living and pay for their part-time study. They do not live with their parents (or in dormitories); they live with their partners (and families). They do not become involved in college activities; most college activities have closed for the day by the time they arrive for class. They do not spend a lot of their time at college socially integrating; unless social integration occurs during the 15 minute break mid-class. If social and academic integration is going to occur for the part-time student, it will have to be during one of the 3 hour classes that the student attends 2 to 3 times per week. The only interface the student has with the college is via the individual standing before the class, who is not only their teacher, but also college management, administration, counsellor, advisor and security. This is the nature of the circumstances of the part-time adult student – circumstances that are a far cry from those of the full-time student who arrives here straight from high school.

Thus the literature regarding student attrition strongly suggests non-persistence behaviour occurs at various critical points throughout the student career. These critical points can be classified as either short-term (e.g. from enrolment to the student's first class, or during the first term), or longer term (e.g. at the completion of the first semester, following third term of the first year, at the commencement of the second year etc.). The present paper focuses on the critical attrition point that accounts for the largest single episode of attrition (Kambouri & Francis, 1994; Malicky & Norman, 1994; Quigley, 1995; White & Mosely, 1995)—the first 6 to 8 weeks of the new student study program. Despite the contribution made to the study of attrition, the disparate findings regarding null, direct and indirect effects of the variables comprised in the Tinto and Bean models, particularly for non-traditional student populations, calls into question the general application across diverse environments without consideration of and refinement to the conceptual framework on which each model is built. In what follows is an overview of the revision and refinement of various aspects of these theoretical models to meet the specific circumstances of a community college environment.

A Theoretical Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition

Given that previous research suggests that the Tinto (1982) and Bean (1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985) are theoretical postulates that could benefit from revision and refinement based on recent research advancements (Tinto, 1990), the current paper is underpinned by a model that both synthesises and extends the features of those models in order to theorise the causes of attrition specifically in the New South Wales Technical and Further Education (TAFE) environment.

Model Facets

Referred to as the Theoretical Model of Non-traditional Student Attrition (Wylie, 2004), the newly developed conceptual model has two critical processes which are theorised to be sequential and causal in their ordering (see Figure 1). These processes are referred to as the Pre-Enrolment Evaluation, and Re-evaluation and Disengagement facets. In what follows is a summarised account of the processes of the theorised model for the current paper.

Pre-Enrolment Evaluation: Undertaking the Study Commitment

The model begins with consideration of the background variables identified in the Bean (1980) Model of Student Attrition (e.g. age, gender, enrolment status, high school performance etc.). The next level has four main aspects, two of which are again taken from the Bean model. These include Academic variables (e.g. study habits, academic advising, and course availability etc.) and Environmental variables (e.g. finances, hours of employment, and outside encouragement etc.).

It is at this point that the model of attrition for the current report deviates from the Bean model. Two new factors are incorporated in the recent model to address the perceptions and evaluation processes that accompany the individual's considerations of course participation. The third aspect of the second order variable sets, referred

to as Perceptions of Utility, combines factors derived from both the Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980) models of attrition and considers both intrinsic (e.g. perceptions regarding enhancement of career and social mobility, psychological costs such as stress, level of commitment to the course), and extrinsic (e.g. positive/negative pressures generated by the expectations of others). The fourth and final variable set of the second order factors is referred to as Existing Self-Worth. It is highly unlikely that the prospective student enrolls in their course of study with a “blank slate” of self-perceptions, but more likely to have generated a set of evaluations of self (e.g. pre-course perceptions of academic and social self-worth levels, risk evaluation of positive/negative impact to self-worth through course participation) as a product of their background and experiences. Perceptions of Utility and Existing Self-Worth facets are deemed to have the most potential to act as the benchmark from which students will make the determination to continue in or withdraw from their participation in the course of study. Recent research has identified the Perceptions of Utility factors separately as important potential predictors of attrition (Summers, 2003; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Allen, 1994) and variables comprising the Existing Self-worth facets as powerful mediating variables to influence behavioural outcomes (Craven, Marsh & Burnett, 2003; Marsh & Yeung, 1997). The following is an overview of the two new domains.

Perceptions of Utility and Course Demands. This second order set of variables refers to the student’s assessment of the positive and negative aspects of course participation and the undertaking of the study commitment. This domain combines factors derived from both the Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980) models of attrition and considers both intrinsic (e.g. precepts regarding enhancement of career and social mobility, psychological costs such as stress, and level of commitment to the course), and extrinsic (e.g. positive/negative pressures generated by the expectations of others) facets. Estimates of positive outcomes are made by the student regarding the potential for the program of study to enhance job and career prospects, professional and social standing, and class mobility. Evaluations also include dealing with the possibility of varying satisfaction and stress levels, and the academic and social responsibilities that come with participating in the course. In other words, the student attempts to determine “Is the commitment to study worth it?”

Existing Academic and Self-Worth. Existing self-worth refers to the levels of academic and social self-concept levels that the student has at the time of considering the challenge of course participation. Quigley (1995) suggests that many non-persisters clearly value education, and although they may be motivated enough to enrol in a study program, negative past experiences of school and the resulting low self-worth may be too overwhelming for the student to continue in the study program. Malicky and Norman (1994) support this contention, but also include family experiences of the student as a significant influence in the development of student perceptions.

Self-worth theory proposes that self-perceptions are determined by self-attributions, and that the individual formulates self-attributions and behaviour in order to achieve feelings of self-worth (Covington, 1984; 1992; Covington & Omelich, 1979). Self-worth is considered synonymous with self-esteem (Craven, Marsh & Debus, 1991), and research has established that the acquisition of a positive self-concept is considered a desirable goal (Marsh, 1987; Craven, Marsh & Burnett, 2003), and may act as an important mediating variable that facilitates the attainment of other desirable outcomes, such as academic achievement (Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976; Marsh & Yeung, 1997), improved self-worth, self-efficacy and self-fulfilment (Marsh & Craven, 1997), and persistence (Miville & Sedlacek, 1991). Thus, the high importance placed on the enhancement of self-concept is usually based on the premise that high self-concept is associated with feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance (Craven et al., 1991). In regard to the influence of these constructs in the present model, it is theorised that a risk evaluation is undertaken by the student regarding the likelihood of failure and the potential effects on existing self-concept levels. In other words, the student considers the questions “What is the risk of feeling worse about myself?” and “What will others think of me?” as a result of attempting the course and failing. The model for the current report therefore postulates that the relation of the self-concept is as a mediating variable to intended (or actual) persistence/non-persistence behaviour.

Taken together, these five factors (Background, Academic, Environmental, Course Utility and Self-Worth) are hypothesized as the process of evaluation that the student undertakes prior to course enrolment and participation. The depth of these evaluations will be different for every student and the combination of influences of the many variables comprised in each of the five pre-course factors will also vary between individuals. It is proposed that the reason why extensive attrition research over several decades has not been able to identify any

individual or string of variables as the major cause of student non-persistence is because researchers have attempted to find a single process by the student in determining the continuation or withdrawal from their study program. The five facets mentioned above are theorised to influence the student's decision to enrol/participate in a course of study. Although these factors may also play a role in a student's determination to withdraw, it is suggested that this occurs during a separate set of processes of re-evaluation, separation and disengagement.

Re-Evaluation and Disengagement: Separation from the Study Commitment

The second major aspect of the model depicted in Figure 1 refers specifically to the period when the student begins a re-evaluation of their participation in the course of study and enters into a process of disengaging themselves from the study commitment. It is postulated that this action begins following their enrolment in (or their commitment to undertake) the course. This aspect of the model comprises another four new facets, including: Academic Self-Worth Adjustment; Social Self-Worth Adjustment; Re-evaluation of Participation; and the Disengagement Process. On each occasion that the academic and social self-concepts of the student are negatively impacted (as a result of the influence of the first and second order variable sets, and regardless of whether those considerations are based on real or imagined perceptions), further re-evaluation of their participation in the course occurs in conjunction with the increase in separation behaviour patterns. The process is theorised to be spiralling in nature and continues until disengagement from the study commitment is reached.

Academic and Social Self-Worth Adjustment. This facet is defined as the process of adjustments made by the student to various and multiple facets of the academic and social self-concept levels that existed prior to undertaking the program of study. Research suggests that it is at this time of transition into the study program that the student is most vulnerable to withdrawal, with doubts of self-worth (Chickering, 1969) being one of the most common causes of attrition. Strategies to develop and maintain self-concept are viewed as a critical measure to be employed at this time (Jackson et al., 1996). Messer and Harter (1986, p. 2) suggest that "By measuring self-worth independently of competence/adequacy judgments we can address the relationship between self-worth and domain-specific self-perceptions". Earlier research by Harter (1986) had shown that this relation is mediated by the importance or the salience of specific self-worth domains. Based on the premise of William James (1890/1963), who postulated that an individual's overall self-esteem represents the ratio of one's successes to one's pretensions, Messer and Harter (1986, p. 2) posited that "if one is successful in domains deemed important, the individual will possess high self-esteem. Conversely, if one is not successful in areas where one aspires to be competent, the result will be low self-esteem".

A longitudinal study of 2 and 4 year university students ($N = 2,544$) by House (1993, p. 127) using logistic regression analyses, found that from the multiple measures of overall academic self-concept (i.e. students' self-ratings of their overall academic ability), drive to achieve, mathematical ability, writing ability, and self-confidence in their intellectual ability included in the study, "Students' self-concept of their overall academic ability was the single most significant predictor of subsequent school withdrawal". It is therefore suggested that the postulates of the model proposed in this paper (i.e. that as the self-worth adjustments are made, the student begins a process of intercession, which for the student who will inevitably withdraw, fails and destabilises self-concept levels) is developed from a strong base of past research.

Re-Evaluation. This facet refers to the process undertaken by the student in reconsidering their commitment to continue in their program of study as a consequence of the impact of adjustments to their academic and social self-worth. The student weighs the implications of withdrawal or persistence regarding the extent of negative outcomes on extrinsic aspects such as employment prospects and intrinsic factors such as self-esteem and self-efficacy. An ongoing interaction between re-evaluation and disengagement is subsequently set in motion.

Disengagement Process. Disengagement refers to the creation and employment of behaviour patterns by the student to achieve ever-increasing distance and separation from the study commitment. This process does not preclude the withdrawn individual from creating one of a host of socially acceptable explanations for having dropped out of their program of study, mostly citing factors external to their control (e.g. work demands, insufficient time for study, illness, financial difficulties, family demands). The phenomenon of attributing causes for failure to external sources was predicted and explained by attribution theory (Weiner, 1972; 1974), where for

example, “those who do not complete a course prefer to attribute their withdrawal to factors outside their control in order to salvage some self-esteem. Those who succeed prefer to point to internal causes in order to enhance their self-esteem. If anyone were to ask graduating students for the reasons for their success, no doubt most, if not all, would give reasons corresponding to internal control, such as hard work, perseverance or cleverness” (Kember, 1999, p. 114). Self-worth theorists also suggest that students use self-serving strategies to preserve public and private impressions of competency when risking failure (Craven et al., 1991). Cullen (1994) suggested that attrition researchers should be cautious regarding data collection in this area, as students may offer “last straw” reasons for dropping out when in reality they may be the least threatening to reveal.

Intent to Leave. This process is included in the model to cater for the student who has actually formulated such an intention. It is theorised that the student who forms an intention to leave still experiences the process of re-evaluation and disengagement, however, at some point there is a conscious decision taken to leave the study program. For the majority of non-persisters, however, it is theorised that as a result of the cyclic process of re-evaluation and disengagement, no formal decision to withdraw is actually made—the student in this case is simply no longer attending the course.

Short-Term Attrition Vs Long-Term Research

Based on the theory of planned behaviour (see Ajzen & Madden, 1986), where it is posited that the intention to act is the immediate antecedent of actual behaviour, Koslowsky (1993) recommended that to achieve reliable measures in the prediction of student persistence a relatively short time interval between measurement of the variable and the behaviour is necessary. However, House (1992) has found that in contrast to previously established research of relatively short duration, his longitudinal study examining student outcomes after 2 and 4 years following enrolment demonstrated the capacity of the longitudinal approach to more accurately identify prediction variables. Typically, the actual performance measure for early crisis point attrition research is generally derived from the end of first semester outcomes (more often returning second semester or returning second year outcomes) for the student, and typically long after the majority of withdrawn students have actually dropped out. The theoretical model presented for discussion in the current paper recognises the appropriateness of the longitudinal approach proposed by House (1992) and attempts to account for the attrition crisis points that occur at later stages throughout the student career. However, for the present investigation that focuses on the first attrition crisis point (i.e. 6 to 8 weeks), and the point where it is posited that the student commences the process of re-evaluation and disengagement, the duration for measurement between students’ initial ratings (e.g. self-concept, self-predication of course completion etc.) and the outcome measurement (i.e. continuing/withdrawn status) should be undertaken directly following the completion of the first term period (i.e. at the commencement of Term 2). It is therefore posited that by focussing the attrition investigation at this particular crisis point more accurate measures of student intentions regarding persistence are likely to be achieved; measures of self-concept may be more valuable in identifying the vulnerable student; and an appropriately designed intervention may reduce the significant number of first episode student withdrawals.

Summary

Thus the theoretical model presented for discussion is designed to take account of the disparate attributes of non-traditional mature-age students in the higher education environment. The first aspect of the Theoretical Model of Non-traditional Student Attrition describes the evaluation procedure undertaken by the student prior to or at the time of enrolment and the undertaking of the study commitment. The second aspect addresses the period (i.e. the first 6 to 8 weeks of the study program) where the process of re-evaluation of course participation and subsequent separation and disengagement from the study commitment is commenced. The model postulates a process where the student whose self-perceptions have been negatively impacted re-evaluates their participation in their course of study and enters a cyclic process of disengagement and separation from the study commitment. Through the identification of constructs that act as mediating variables to persistence behaviour (i.e. self-concept constructs) it is theorised that effective measurement of their impact can alert the researcher to the student who is vulnerable to dropping out. With the application of an appropriate intervention, the impact of the theorised cyclic pattern of disengagement from the study commitment may be averted.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the role and impact of factors previously identified in attrition research as causes of attrition in higher education. Past theoretical assertions have identified attrition to be the result of a failed interaction between the student and the institution, and despite this major focus throughout many decades of attrition research, non-persistence rates reported in U.S. college and university studies have continued to remain consistently high. This is not to suggest that student-institution interaction is irrelevant, however, given that there is very little opportunity for the building of student-institution relations in TAFE's part-time study programs suggests that causes for attrition may not necessarily be based in integration outcomes. The current paper proposes that the challenge of a new and uncertain environment that requires one to meet the rigor of study and established standards of academic ability and the demands of interpersonal interaction are more possibly the contributing factors in the decision of the mature-age student to withdraw. The writer proposes that causes for student dropout may be found in the interaction of various self-concepts with a student initiated process of re-evaluation of course participation and subsequent disengagement by the student from their study commitment. The conceptual model developed for the current paper is short-term and crisis specific, designed to explain and test attrition for the non-traditional mature-age and part-time student populations specifically. Non-persistence behaviour is attributed to the disorder experienced by the student in academic and social self-worth (self-concepts) that inevitably lead to a student initiated process of forming an intention to, or actually disengaging from the study commitment. Further research that has these processes as its central investigative focus could result in significant improvements in persistence rates for the non-traditional student in higher education.

About the Author

Dr John Wylie is presently the Faculty Manager of Organisational Sciences at the Western Sydney Institute of TAFE, Blacktown College, Sydney, Australia. Over two decades of exposure to the extremely high attrition rates in higher education, together with the suspicion that self-concept issues may be involved, formed the basis for his investigations into mature-age student non-persistence patterns. John has participated in various higher education conferences presenting on issues such as attrition, self-concept, teacher evaluation, and mature-age learning styles.

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