

PSICOLOGIA DELL'EDUCAZIONE
E DELLA FORMAZIONE

volume 11

Numero 2 – anno 2009



SIPEF
SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI PSICOLOGIA
DELL'EDUCAZIONE E DELLA FORMAZIONE
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Editore:

Aracne Editrice s.r.l.
Via R. Garofalo, 133 a-b
00173 Roma

Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Roma
n. 12/2009 del 16/01/2009

ISSN: 1128-6881
ISBN: 98-88-548-3219-0

Covered by PsycINFO

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Revisions to a Theory of Student Departure From Commuter Colleges and Universities

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This article describes the formulations of a revised theory of student departure from colleges and universities that primarily enroll students who live at home with their parents or spouses or who live independently from their parents and family. This theory stresses the role of student entry characteristics, the external environment, curricular arrangements and teaching practices and organizational characteristics in influencing such core constructs as student academic and intellectual development and their subsequent level of commitment to their university which, in turn, shape student decisions to remain enrolled or to depart from their university.

Introduction

College student departure constitutes a long-standing problem in the United States. Tinto reports a constant rate of departure for a period of over 100 years from 1880 to 1980 with a slight deviation in the rate occurring after the end of World War II (1982). More recently, departure rates have varied little between 1987 and 2001 (American College Testing Program, 2001). In more specific terms, forty five percent of students enrolled in a two-year college depart at the end of their first year, whereas approximately

twenty-five percent of first-year students enrolled in a four year college or university depart at the end of their first-year (American College Testing Program, 2001).

The nettlesome problem of college student retention also confronts the nation of Italy as Usher and Cervenán (2005) assert that the Italian Higher Education system faces a serious problem of student retention (p. 39). More specifically, Usher and Cervenán report that Italy has an attainment or completion rate of 12 percent.

In the United States, the problem of college student retention has been an object of empirical attention for well over seventy years (Braxton, 2000). During the past 34 years, the most progress on understanding this problem has occurred through theoretical and empirical attention. The work of such scholars as Tinto (1975; 1993), Bean (1980, 1983, 2000), Bean and Metzner (1985), Terenzini and Pascarella (1977, 1980), Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) and Cabrera and Nora (1992) have contributed to this progress.

In 2004, Amy S. Hirschy, Shederick A. McClendon, and I published *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure*. In this volume, we posited two theories of college student departure. One theory seeks to explain student departure from residential colleges and universities, whereas the other theory accounts for student departure from commuter colleges and universities. Residential colleges and universities primarily enroll students that either live in an on-campus college or university residence facilities or those students who live off-campus in close proximity to the college or university. Commuter colleges and universities primarily enroll students that either live at home with their parents or live at home with their spouses or life-partners. Their travel to the college or university is by car, bus, or train. However, many institutions consist of mixed student bodies comprised of both residential and commuting students.

The overwhelming majority of students enrolled in Italian institutions of higher education correspond to the defining characteristics of commuting students. More specifically, 68% of Italian students live at home with their parents or family and another 28% live independently (Usher and Cervenán, 2005). Moreover, 54% of Italian students work during the semester while enrolled in an institution of higher education. (Usher and Cervenán, 2005). Hence, I describe the theory of student departure from commuter universities in this article. In describing this theory, I also present some revisions to this theory based on further reflections and research findings. Some of these revisions pertain particularly to the Italian higher education context.

Distinctions Between Residential and Commuter Colleges and Universities

I offer distinctions between residential and commuter colleges and universities before presenting the formulations of the theory of student departure from commuter colleges and universities. Understanding these distinctions brings greater clarity to these formulations.

The role of the external environment and the characteristics of campus social communities constitute two differentiating factors that necessitate separate theoretical formulations to account for student persistence in residential and commuter colleges and universities. The external environment plays a major role in the persistence of students enrolled in commuter institutions. Commuting institutions enroll a mix of students to include students who live at home with their parents, unmarried students that work and attend college, and married students with families who work and attend college (Stewart and Rue, 1983). Thus, the external forces of family and work largely determine the daily activities of commuting students (Webb, 1990).

Moreover, ill-structured and poorly defined characterize the social communities of commuter colleges and universities (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2004). Thus, students in such institutions find it difficult to establish membership in the social communities of their college or university. Consequently, the communities of the classroom and pedagogy play a significant part in the departure decisions of students in commuter college and universities (Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 1993). For students in commuter institutions, such academic dimensions provide the basis for institutional affiliation or commitment. In stark contrast, the social communities of residential colleges are both well-defined and structured. Hence, ample opportunities exist for students in residential colleges and universities to establish membership in one or more of the social communities of their institution. In residential colleges and universities, social integration provides the basis for institutional commitment.

A Theory of Student Departure in Commuter Colleges and Universities

Student entry characteristics, the external environment, the campus environment, academic and intellectual development, subsequent institutional commitment, and the students' decision to persist at the focal commuter col-

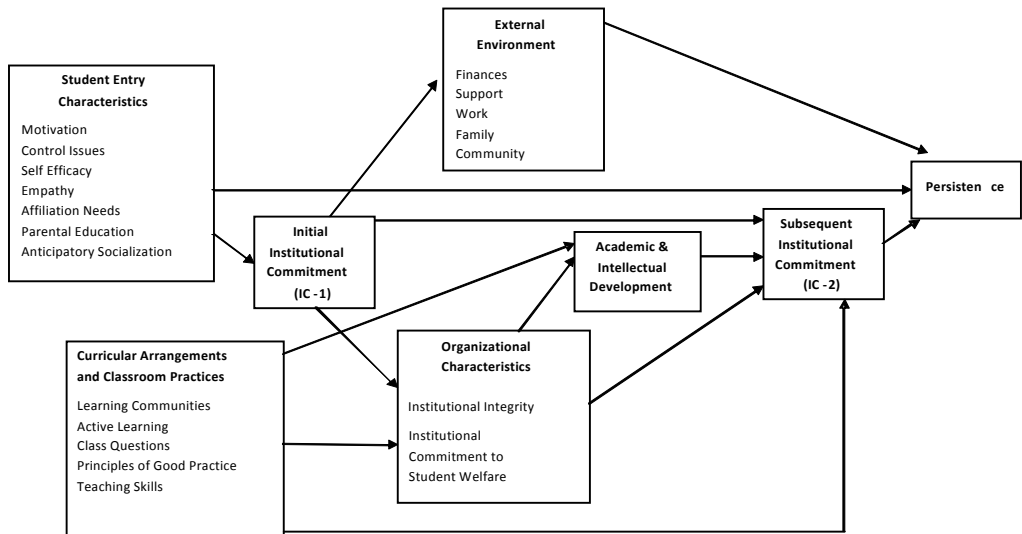
lege or university constitute the components of this theory of student departure in commuter institutions. Figure 1 displays the longitudinal nature of the relationships among these components and their attendant constructs. This Figure includes the revisions made to this theory presented in this article. The specific formulations of this theory follow.

Student entry characteristics play an important part in the departure decisions of students enrolled in commuter colleges and universities. Some entry characteristics (e.g. academic ability and high school academic achievement) affect the initial level of commitment that a student holds for their chosen college or university (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997). The initial level of commitment to the institution also takes the form an entry characteristic. This initial level of commitment also influences the student's level of commitment to the institution that develops as a result of attending the chosen institution (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997). This subsequent level of commitment to the institution, in turn, affects student departure decisions. Specifically, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997).

The External Environment

Entry characteristics also shape the way students perceive their experiences with the external environment. For example, the personality trait of empathy structures student perceptions of the demands of the external environment that impact their daily lives. Commuter students frequently have obligations distinct from attending college. For some, these obligations include work and family (Tinto, 1993). The commitments of both work and attending college may negatively affect the families of commuter students. Departure from college may result for those students aware of the negative effects of their college attendance on such significant others. Put differently, students with the personality trait of empathy tend to be more likely to depart from commuter colleges and universities (Zhang & RiCharde, 1998).

As a consequence, encouragement and support for attending college becomes crucial. Students who receive support and encouragement to attend college from significant others are less likely to depart (Schwartz, 1990; Mutter, 1992; Okun, Benin and Brandt-Williams, 1996; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella and Hagedorn, 1999; Pike et al., 1997).



Source: Revision of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004)

Figure 1. Theory of Student Departure in commuter Colleges and Universities

Support from significant others looms particularly important for racial/ethnic minority students. Minority students who attend commuter institutions often have jobs, live away from campus, and have demanding family responsibilities (Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn and Pascarella, 1996). In this case, departure decisions are influenced by how students negotiate these conflicts and how much support students receive from significant others for college attendance. For those minority students whose initial goal and/or institutional commitments are weak the impact of significant others can have a positive or negative influence on persistence (Tinto, 1993). When the value orientations of significant others support the goals of college attendance, they positively influence persistence (Nora, 1987; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella and Hagedorn, 1999). When they oppose them, the reverse may apply. To that end, one would expect that racial and ethnic minorities often face barriers while attempting to complete degree programs.

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The negative effects on families due to work while attending college diminishes if the financial costs of attending college are minimized. In turn, support and encouragement to attend college from significant others also increases if the financial costs of attending college are minimized. Thus, the lower the costs of college attendance incurred by the student, the greater their likelihood of persisting in college (St. John & Starkey, 1995).

However, the costs of attending a commuter college or university pose a particular difficulty for racial/ethnic minority students. Racial and ethnic minority students who attend commuter institutions tend to be more sensitive to costs of college tuition and less willing to use educational loans (Kaltenbaugh, St. John, & Starkey, 1999). 1986; Nora, 1990; Hu & St. John, 2001).

The Campus Environment

Student characteristics contribute to the shaping of the institutional environments—academic and social--of colleges and universities (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Holland, 1997; Clark, 1971). Accordingly, the characteristics of students who commute to college mold to a large extent the environments of such collegiate institutions. These characteristics also affect student perceptions of their experiences with the institutional environment of the commuter college or university.

Commuter students spend a very limited amount of time on the campus of a commuter college or university (Tinto, 1993). The time spent on campus typically involves attending class and meeting degree requirements (Tinto,

1993). Students hurry to attend their classes and hurry to leave the campus to go to work or to go home. Such time demands minimize the social involvement of commuting students. These forms of comings and goings create a "buzzing confusion." The order that exists comes from the daily schedule of classes meeting at their appointed times.

Student adjustment to the "buzzing confusion" that characterizes the campus environment of the commuter institution requires student motivation to make steady progress toward graduation and to graduate from college.. Motivation to graduate from college exerts a positive influence on student persistence (Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton, 2001). Motivation to make steady progress toward college completion also positively impacts student retention (Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton, 2001)

Given the role of external forces and the confusion that characterizes the commuter institution, students must also believe that their efforts in attending college will result in academic success and graduation. Put differently, commuter students must have high levels of self-efficacy, another necessary entry personality trait. Hence, the stronger a student's belief that they can achieve a desired outcome through their own efforts, the less likely they will depart from a commuter college or university (Zhang & RiCharde, 1998).

The need for control constitutes another influential entry personality trait. Students who require order in their daily lives and have a need for control over events in their lives may experience difficulty adjusting to the confusing nature of the institutional environment of the commuter institution. Those students with a high need for order may be especially challenged by the need to balance academic work with the demands of family and work responsibilities. Consequently, the greater a student's need for control and order in their daily lives, the greater their likelihood of departure (Bers, 1985; Zhang & RiCharde, 1998).

In addition to the "buzzing confusion" that depicts the campus environment of the commuter institution, the lack of well-defined and ill-structured student social communities provide additional defining characteristics that present difficulties to some students. For example, students with a need for social affiliation find such a need unfulfilled given that such students are friendly, like to participate in activities with others, and hold a group orientation (Stern, 1970). Thus, the greater the student's need for social affiliation, the more likely their departure from a commuter college or university (Pascarella and Chapman, 1983).

Parental educational level, an entry student characteristic, also influences the meanings students attach to the poorly formed social communities of

commuter colleges and universities. Student images of the ideal characteristics of colleges and universities come from a variety of sources such as parents, teachers, high school college counselors, students, movies, television and the media. "Residentiality" represents one element of the image of a college or university (Kamens, 1977). Residentiality is a symbolic role of higher education involving the physical and social isolation of students from their life prior to attending college (Kamens, 1977). The ill-defined structure of the social communities of the commuter institution provides a striking contrast to this notion of "residentiality." Parents who attended college are more likely to hold residentiality as an important characteristic of a college or university. As a consequence, as parental educational level increases, the likelihood of departure from a commuter college or university increases Halpin (1990; Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton (2001).

However, the role of parental education may significantly differ for Italian students enrolled in higher education institutions because the notion of residentiality may play a minimal role given the low percentage of Italian students who live in university residences. *Thus, we might expect that parental educational level positively affects the persistence of Italian students.*

Students who engage in anticipatory socialization behaviors before enrolling in a commuter institution are also more likely to depart (Nora, Attinasi, and Matonak, 1990. Students who engage in such "getting ready behaviors" as forming early expectations for college and participating in prematriculations activities (Nora, Attinasi, and Matonak, 1990) learn that "residentiality" does not accurately depict day-to-day enrollment at a commuter institution. However, prospective university students in Italy may not engage in such "getting ready behaviors." Without knowledge of how secondary school students in Italy go about the process of selecting a university to attend, it is difficult to predict the effects of such "getting ready behaviors."

Organizational Characteristics

Characteristics of the commuter college or university as an organization also play an important part in the student departure process. Such characteristics also contribute to the definition of the campus environment. In particular, two organizational characteristics directly affect subsequent levels of student commitment to his or her institution. These two characteristics also wield an indirect influence on student departure

decisions. These organizational characteristics are commitment of the institution to the welfare of its students and institutional integrity (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2004). Commuter College or university exhibits these characteristics in varying degrees; from little or no presence of the characteristic to it being an important and defining characteristic of the organization.

Institutional commitment to the welfare of its students manifests itself as an institution's abiding concern for the growth and development of its students. An institution committed to the welfare of its students also clearly communicates the high value it places on students in groups as well as individuals. The equitable treatment of students and respect for them as individuals constitute additional aspects of this construct (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004; Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004).

This construct parallels Joseph Hermanowicz's (2003) concept of "enforced success." He derived this concept from case studies of four highly selective research universities that vary in their retention rates. The university with the highest retention rate has what Hermanowicz (2003) terms a culture of enforced success. In such a culture all students are treated as if they are at-risk. Key people believe in the promise of each student in a fervently held way.

Students who perceive through the actions of these organizational agents that commitment to the welfare of students represents an abiding concern of their college or university develop a stronger subsequent level of commitment to their institution. Thus, the greater the degree of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college (Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004).

In revising this theory, I also posit that students' perceptions of the commitment of their institution to the welfare of students also influence their academic and intellectual development in a positive way. In the 2004 statement of this theory, such a linkage between commitment of the institution to student welfare and academic and intellectual development was not delineated. If students perceive that their college or university is committed to their welfare, then they are more likely to engage themselves more fully in their course work and course learning. Put differently, students perceive that their college or university wants them to experience success as students.

Institutional Integrity is defined as the extent to which a college or university is true to its espoused mission and goals (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004; Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004). Institutional integrity demonstrates itself when the actions of a college or university's

administrators, faculty and staff are compatible with the mission and goals proclaimed by a given college or university.

The actions of administrators, faculty, and staff also provide students with opportunities to appraise the extent to which their institution remains true to its mission and goals. Greater levels of subsequent institutional commitment develop in students who perceive that their college or university exhibits such institutional integrity. Thus, the greater the degree of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997, Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004).

I also posit a linkage between institutional integrity and academic and intellectual development. The delineation of this positive relationship stands as a revision to the 2004 set of formulations. If students perceive that their college or university exhibits institutional integrity, then they are more likely to fully engage in their course work and course learning.

These two revisions place the organizational characteristics of commitment of the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity as antecedents to both academic development and subsequent institutional commitment. Figure 1 reflects these revisions.

Curricular Arrangements and Classroom Practices

The campus environment also consists of academic communities that play an important role in the student decisions to depart or continue their enrollment in a given commuter college or university. The importance of experiences with the academic dimensions of the commuter institutions spring from the ill-defined and poorly structured nature of the social communities of commuter institutions.

Curricular arrangements and classroom practices shape academic communities, communities of the classroom. Small communities develop around specific courses. In particular, learning communities, a curricular arrangement, contribute to the formation of a community of the classroom. Learning communities involve the block scheduling of courses so the same group of students takes a set of courses together (Tinto, 1997, 1998, 2000). A theme typically underlies the set of courses. Participation in a learning community wields a positive influence on student persistence in a commuter college or university (Tinto, 1997). Such participation also contributes to a student's academic and intellectual development (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2004). However, such communities develop only if faculty members apply pedagogical skills and practices that encourage student

learning. Active learning constitutes one such pedagogical practice used by faculty members. Active learning pertains to class activities that involve students in thinking about the subject matter of a course (Bowell and Eison, 1991). Active learning practices include cooperative learning, debates, role playing, discussion and pair and group work. Active learning enhances student course learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Anderson and Adams, 1992; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991; McKeachie, Pintrich, Yi Guang and Smith, 1986).

The 2004 statement of this theory included learning communities and active learning as antecedents to subsequent institutional commitment. Herein, I offer four sets of revisions, The first revision pertains to the change in the name of the construct of academic integration in the 2004 version of this theory to academic and intellectual development in the current form of this theory. The rationale for this slight but significant change involves the face validity of the typical approaches to the measurement of this construct in research studies. These measures typically include student perceptions of their intellectual growth and development and estimates of their grade-point-average (Braxton and Brier, 1989; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, Hengstler, 1992; Pascarella, Duby and Iverson, 1983; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980; Pascarella, And Terenzini, 1983; Terenzini, Pascarella, Theophilides and Lorang, 1985). These measures provide face validity for the operationalization of academic and intellectual development and not academic integration (Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan, 2000). Academic integration refers to a student's perception of their congruence with attitudes and values of the academic communities of the institution and a perception that they are not intellectually isolated (Braxton and Lien, 2000).

The second revision entails the placement of academic and intellectual development as an antecedent to subsequent institutional commitment. The greater the degree of academic and intellectual development perceived by a student, the greater their degree of subsequent commitment to commuter college or university. This relationship receives empirical affirmation in seven out of ten tests of it conducted in commuter institutions (Braxton and Lien, 2000).

The delineation of curricular arrangements and classroom practices as antecedents to the commitment of the institution to the welfare of its students, academic and intellectual development as well as to subsequent institutional commitment constitute the third revision. Put in different words, these curricular arrangements and classroom practices jointly influence students' perceptions of the commitment of their college or university to the welfare of its students and academic and intellectual development. The

prevalence of such curricular arrangements and teaching skills and practices shape student perceptions that their college or university holds an abiding concern for their growth and development. Moreover, research suggest that curricular arrangements and teaching skills and practices also affect student learning which in turn affects their level of academic and intellectual development. In the 2004 formulation, curricular arrangements and classroom practices were viewed as antecedents to subsequent institutional commitment as depicted in Figure 6 (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2004).

The fourth revision pertains to the delineation of additional teaching practices and skills to the classroom experience: the types of questions faculty ask students during class, the type of graded assignment faculty develop, the use of good practices in undergraduate education, and the teaching skills of organization and preparation and instructional clarity. The positive influence these teaching practices (Sorcinelli, 1991) and teaching skills exert on student course learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005)) coupled with the assumption that student course learning positively affects the academic and intellectual development of students provide the rationale for their inclusion in the current iteration of this theory . Because of these teaching skills and practices, students also come to view their college or university as committed to their welfare as students.

To elaborate, the type of questions faculty ask students during class provide another way to actively engage students in their learning. Higher order thinking questions actively engage students in the content of their courses. Higher order questions require students to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate course content (Fischer and Grant, 1983; Braxton and Nordvall, 1985; Nordvall and Braxton, 1996). Accordingly, student academic and intellectual development increases with increments in faculty questions that require higher order thinking to respond. Likewise, students come to view their college or university as committed to their welfare as students.

In addition to the type of questions faculty ask students during class, the type of assignments faculty give to evaluate student performance in a course for the purpose of awarding grades also directly contribute to student academic and intellectual development and indirectly to student retention. Examinations, term papers, and other written exercises constitute typical graded course assignments that function to evaluate student course performance.

The level of understanding of course content provides a framework for designing such graded instruments of evaluation. Bloom's (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain* provides a schema for the design of course examination questions, instructions for term papers and other written exercises that signify the level of understanding of course content

displayed by students. Categories of Bloom's Taxonomy range from the lowest to the highest level of understanding: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The higher the level of understanding of course content that students must demonstrate on examinations, term papers and other written assignments, the greater the level of student course learning achieved and in turn, the greater their level of academic and intellectual development. As posited in Figure 1, academic and intellectual development positively influences subsequent institutional commitment which, in turn, positively affects the student's likelihood of persisting in their chosen university. Recent research supports this assertion as it shows that answering higher order questions in coursework enhances the critical thinking abilities of students (Renaud and Murray, 2007). Renaud and Murray conclude from the three research studies they conducted that "the findings of this research clearly indicate that students are more likely to improve their critical thinking skills when they have answered higher-order questions in their coursework (2007, p. 345)."

Other pedagogical practices that contribute to student course learning include faculty use of seven principles of good practices for undergraduate education in their courses (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Student course learning benefits from experience with these good practices in their classroom (Sorcinelli, 1991). Encouragement of student-faculty contact, encouragement of cooperation among students, encouragement of active learning, provision of prompt feedback, time on task, the communication of high expectations and respect for diverse talents and ways of knowing constitute the seven principles.

In addition, faculty teaching skills such as having a good command of the subject matter, clarity in the explanation of course material, structuring the course and using course time well, and using examples to identify key points also enhance student course learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Such course learning, in turn, positively influences students' academic and intellectual development as well as their perceptions of the commitment of their college or university to the welfare of its students.

To recapitulate, curricular arrangements and faculty teaching practices and skills jointly influence student perceptions of the commitment of their institution to the welfare of its students and their level of academic and intellectual development. Student perceptions of the commitment of their college or university to the welfare of its students also wield an influence on the academic and intellectual development of students. The greater the degree of academic and intellectual development perceived by a student, the greater their degree of subsequent commitment to a commuter college or university

(Braxton and Lien, 2000). The greater the student's degree of subsequent institutional commitment, the greater the likelihood of their continued enrollment in a commuter college or university (Tinto, 1975; 1993; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997).

Closing Thoughts

University student departure poses a nettlesome problem in both Italy and the United States. I present the theory described in this article to assist the research communities in Italy to in developing a knowledge and understanding of the complexities of student departure or retention in commuter colleges and universities in Italy. The concepts advanced in this theory should resonate with Italian scholars in the disciplines of psychology and sociology as well as other fields. A rigorous testing of the propositions of this theory should yield findings useful to the development of policies and practices designed to improve institutional student retention and ultimately graduation rates. The development and implementation of such possible policies and practice would go a long way towards addressing the problem of student retention in Italy.

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Riassunto

Revisione di una Teoria dell'Abbandono Universitario per student non residenti di College ed Università

Il presente articolo descrive la formulazione di una teoria dell'abbandono universitario rivisitata, che coinvolge principalmente studenti che vivono in casa con i genitori, persone sposate e persone che vivono indipendentemente dalla loro famiglia. Questa teoria sottolinea il ruolo delle caratteristiche di entrata degli studenti, del contesto esterno, dell'organizzazione curricolare, delle pratiche d'insegnamento e delle caratteristiche organizzative nell'influenzare alcuni costrutti chiave come lo sviluppo accademico ed intellettuale dello studente ed i suoi conseguenti livelli di commitment verso la loro università che, a loro volta, plasma la decisione dello studente di rimanere nel percorso universitario o di abbandonarlo.

Résumé

Révision de la théorie de l'abandon pour les étudiants non-résidents de l'University College et l'Université

Cet article décrit l'élaboration d'une théorie de l'abandon universitaire revisitée, impliquant principalement les étudiants qui vivent à la maison avec les parents, les personnes mariées et les personnes vivant indépendamment de leurs familles. Cette

théorie met l'accent sur le rôle des caractéristiques des étudiants entrants, l'environnement externe, l'organisation des programmes, la pratique de l'enseignement et les caractéristiques organisationnelles clés pour influencer certains des concepts comme le développement intellectuel et universitaire de l'étudiant et son taux subséquents de engagement en faveur de leurs universités que, à leur tour, façonnent la décision de rester en arrière-plan académique de l'étudiant ou à laisser.

Parole chiave

teoria, retention, studenti universitari, organizzazione curricular, pratiche d'insegnamento.

Key words

theory, student retention, university students, curricular arrangements and teaching practices.

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