

# Effects of Cultural Distance on Student Socialization and Departure Decisions

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**Abstract:** The study examines the effects of cultural distance on student retention at an urban, Hispanic-serving university. A Cultural Distance Model based on retention research in higher education and organizational socialization theory is posed and the first half of the model is tested using path analysis with results supporting most model assumptions.

## Problem and Significance

Student retention in higher education has not always been a major concern to U.S. educators or to society in general. However, social and political factors in today's environment contribute to increased interest in college student retention, both as a topic of research and as a focus for educational practitioners (Berger & Braxton, 1998). With more students attending college than ever before, student retention and graduation rates have declined since 1980, while institutional accountability and effectiveness measures are forcing university administrators to improve student graduation rates (Alexander, 2000). In response to these trends, researchers focusing on college student attrition are seeking indicators to identify potentially "at-risk" students and provide effective and timely interventions that prevent withdrawal.

To date, research has identified a growing list of potential factors influencing retention in higher education, including student, institutional and external characteristics. However, Kuh and Love (2000) maintain that retention models focus insufficient attention on interaction between student and institution, particularly the gap between a student's culture of origin and the dominant culture of the institution. This research explores that gap, referred to as "cultural distance" by Kuh and Love (2000), and its potential impact on student socialization, a key factor in student re-enrollment decisions according to Spady (1971), Tinto (1975) and others.

The study defines and tests the first portion of a retention model, called the Cultural Distance Model, which elaborates on Tinto's (1975) seminal Student Integration Model. The model includes cultural distance, a centerpiece of Tinto's model, as a possible determinant of successful social integration. Culture is broadly defined, and the model can be adapted to examine a range of student and institutional contrasts including race, ethnicity, socio-economic and first generation status, urban versus rural origins, language, and others. The model states that cultural distance, as experienced by the student upon entry to the university, affects the student's ability to socially adapt and integrate - complete the transition from outsider to insider - which in turn influences the student's decision to re-enroll. If this proposed relationship is viable, the model contributes to our understanding of why students do or do not socially integrate, which in turn provides important implications for interventions to decrease attrition.

## Review of the Literature

Until Spady (1971) and Tinto (1975), student retention research focused primarily on identification of demographic characteristics of students who dropped out of school prior to completing their degree requirements. Spady (1971) introduced the notion of interaction between student and institution, noting that an individual's perception of their "social fit" was important in explaining dropout behavior. Tinto (1975) developed his seminal model of student attrition, stating that the degree to which a student was successfully integrated into the fabric of the

institution was positively correlated to the likelihood the student would persist until graduation. Kuh and Love (2000) put forth a culture-based theory of retention maintaining that the greater the distance between the student's culture of origin and the dominant culture of the institution, the greater the likelihood that the student will withdraw prior to graduation. They also state that successful cultural decoding (making sense out of the new cultural environment) through socialization helps students overcome this distance and remain enrolled.

In their book, *The Invisible Tapestry*, George Kuh and Elizabeth Whitt (1988) present an analysis of culture in U. S. colleges and universities. They state, "Because culture is bound to a context, every institution's culture is different" (p. 13). Further complicating the picture is the largely unconscious nature of cultural influences and the highly subjective interpretation of meaning that occurs even among cultural standard bearers. These factors make it nearly impossible to describe the culture of the institution objectively or to gain consensus on a specific institution's cultural description (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984). Adding to this difficulty is the continually evolving nature of culture. Culture guides interpretation in daily interaction but is also continually being altered by it (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

To clarify the concept of 'dominant culture,' Kuh and Whitt (1988) cite research on organizational culture, which maintains that the relative strength of a culture or subculture is impossible to define. However, according to Van Maanen and Barley (1984), a dominant culture exists and is a significant factor in the college experience. It challenges newcomers or members of under-represented groups as they enter a new environment and attempt to make sense of events and behaviors. While culture can be a stabilizer to socialization, it can also alienate newcomers who may be ignorant of cultural meaning and acceptable modes of response within that particular context. Kuh and Whitt define the dominant student culture as "the set of beliefs, attitudes and values shared by all (or most) students in a particular institution" (p. 84).

Kuh and Love (2000) liken new students to new employees, stating that both "try to understand their new environments using an interpretive scheme or sense-making system developed through experiences in their culture of origin" (p. 202). Van Maanen and Schein (1979), theorists in organizational culture and new member entry, socialization, and adaptation, describe the process new recruits in organizational settings undergo in order to make sense of the new culture and become successful insiders. Van Maanen and Schein describe socialization as "the learning of a cultural perspective that can be brought to bear on both commonplace and unusual matters going on.... the rookie must learn of these understandings and eventually come to make use of them in an entirely matter-of-fact way if he is to continue as a member of the organization" (p. 212). At its core, socialization is a teaching/learning process whereby experienced insiders interact with and educate newcomers (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). A newcomer must begin the social integration process in order to become sufficiently socialized and continue social interaction to the degree required to make the transition from outsider to insider.

Louis (1980) developed a Model of Newcomer Experience in which organizational newcomers experience contrast between expectations based on prior experience and the realities of the new organization and its members. This contrast between the old and new is person-specific and experienced as reactions to the environment, people, and social interactions. For this reason, it is possible to measure cultural distance, not by some externally imposed criteria, but rather as students' reported their feelings. According to Louis, newcomers are faced with the arduous task of traversing cultural distance by reconstructing their own interpretive schemes utilizing an interactive process through which they internalize and interpret feedback from

external sources (sense-making). Louis, Van Maanen and Schein (1979) maintain that newcomer integration is achieved through socialization, Tinto's (1975) basic premise, but with the added insight of what must happen in the socialization process if successful entry and integration are to be achieved. With this insight, organizations can help close the cultural gap for students who may falter on unfamiliar ground.

Theories drawn from Kuh and Love (2000) coupled with time-tested retention theories of Spade, Tinto, Bean, and others parallel organizational theorists Schein, Van Maanen and Louis. Based on the nexus of these theories, an elaboration on Tinto's model of retention is proposed that includes Cultural Distance as a retention factor. This study tests only the first portion of the model responding to the following questions: (a) Do students outside the dominant culture of the institution tend to perceive a cultural distance? (b) Does this perception of cultural distance relate to students' early peer relations and satisfaction with institutional choice? and (c) Does early peer relations and satisfaction with institutional choice influence students' decision to return for the second year?

### **Method**

Participants were selected at a large Hispanic-serving public urban university in the southern U. S. The Hispanic culture dominates the institutional culture as well as the community immediately surrounding the university. Selection of this site enabled testing of the theoretical model as it relates to non-Hispanics adapting to a predominantly Hispanic institution.

Nine weeks into the Fall 2002 semester, freshmen enrolled in the Freshmen Year Experience course were asked to complete an online survey on initial expectations, impressions of the institution, social and academic experiences, and satisfaction. Of the approximately 1400 freshman students enrolled in the class, 704 completed the survey. Only those voluntarily providing their student identification number for retention tracking purposes and completing all study-related questions were included in the sample of 575 used to test the first part of the model. A subsequent study is in progress of the full model, which includes end-of-year socialization, institutional satisfaction and intent to re-enroll. The first portion of the model was tested using 13 questions in a 56-question online survey administered to freshmen in a First Year Experience course. The survey produced a Cronbach's coefficient alpha reliability measurement of .832 based on 704 cases.

#### *Variables*

The model's first independent variable, Student Cultural Characteristics, is comprised of student characteristics to be contrasted with the culture of the institution. In this study, the hypothesized determinant of cultural distance is the students' exposure to the Hispanic culture as measured by their ethnicity (Hispanic versus Non-Hispanic) and their origin inside or outside of Miami-Dade County, FL, where the Hispanic population is 57% (US Census Bureau, 2000). Students were categorized into four subgroups: Hispanic, in County (n =299), Hispanic, out of county (n = 76), Non-Hispanic, in county (n = 81), and Non-Hispanic, out of county (n = 123).

The second independent variable, Student Perceived Cultural Distance, captures the students' sense of "fit" with the institution and was derived as a composite of four questions with a Cronbach's alpha of .65. Statements with Likert scale responses, strongly agree to strongly disagree, included: There have been times when I felt I was too different from most of the people at FIU; I have felt a sense of isolation or disconnection to the Campus community; when I am on campus I feel that I belong at FIU; and I am having problems with the language and cultural difference.

Variable three is the student's feelings of Satisfaction with Peer Relations. Two questions ( $\alpha = .73$ ) were used: I have found other students with whom I could relate; the students I have met at FIU make me feel good about being here. The fourth independent variable, Initial Satisfaction with Institutional Choice, is measured by five (5) questions with a Cronbach's alpha of .87. Sample statements included: So far, I am happy that I enrolled at FIU; I believe that FIU was the wrong choice for me; I have sometimes felt like I was in the wrong university. The dependent variable is actual re-enrollment for the Fall Term of the student's second year, derived by checking student records in the Fall Term. Figure 1 shows the path model to be tested and the direct effect paths used for analysis.

#### *Design and Procedure*

A correlation and prediction design was selected to address the three questions. Path analysis, the most highly recommended procedure for testing attrition models (Berger & Braxton, 1998), was conducted to assess basic assumptions of the model. Path analysis assesses effects of independent variables on the dependent variable as they are mediated by intervening independent variables. In the proposed model, the effect of cultural distance on retention is theoretically mediated by the degree of successful social interaction resulting in greater sense of belonging and satisfaction. Pearson correlations and multiple regressions at  $p < .05$  were used to estimate parameters of the theoretical model up to Initial Satisfaction with Institutional Choice. Due to the dichotomous final dependent variable, logistic regression is used to measure predictive power.

### **Results and Discussion**

Beta coefficients in Table 1, which in the case of direct path regressions are the same as Pearson correlations, reveal that Perceived Cultural Distance is significantly related to Peer Relations (.47) and Satisfaction with Institutional Choice (.63). Students' Cultural Characteristics relate significantly to Perceived Cultural Distance (.20), but they have a very low and insignificant correlation to Peer Relations (-.05) and Satisfaction with Institutional Support (.04). Cultural Characteristics and Satisfaction with Institutional Choice are the only two variables significantly correlated to Return.

Results support the model's assumption that students entering an institution from outside the dominant culture are more likely to experience feelings associated with cultural distance (i.e., isolation, feelings of being different and not belonging). There are much stronger indications from the data that when students feel cultural distance; these feelings are closely related to their early peer relationships and to an even greater degree to their feelings about the institution. The low and insignificant correlations between student cultural characteristics and satisfactions with peer relations and institutional choice indicate that relationship problems or buyer's remorse relating to institutional choice should not be assumed for students coming from outside the dominant culture. High correlations are with cultural distance, not with outsider status alone.

Students in the sample population experiencing cultural distance were significantly more likely to feel they made the wrong choice of institution. These results strengthen the model's assumption that students entering the institution from outside the dominant culture who experience feelings of cultural distance are most likely to experience early difficulties with peer relationships and feel disappointed regarding their choice of institution. Interesting to note, those in the sample from outside the dominant culture who did not experience cultural distance responded to peer relations even more favorably than those from inside the dominant culture.

In the logistic regression to Return, both Student Characteristics and Satisfaction with Institutional Choice are significant in the equation, but the model's overall power to predict

return, though significant, is only 5% ( $R^2 = .05$ ). The relatively low predictive power of the first half of the model supports the need to conduct further analysis on the role of socialization through the second half of the freshman year. Does the strong relationship between cultural distance and satisfaction with peers and institutional choice diminish through the year with continued socialization as the literature indicates? Cultural distance's insignificance in actual return supports that possibility. The study would indicate that even though cultural distance is closely related to satisfaction, other factors play a much more significant role in students' decisions to return for the second year.

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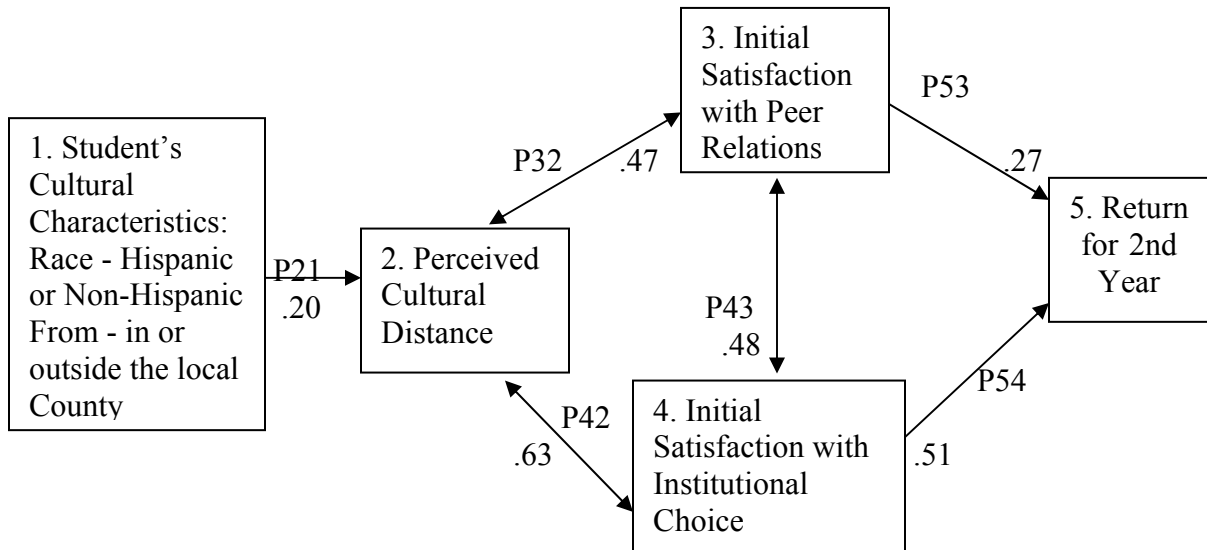


Figure 1. Path Model with Variable Correlations (N = 575)

Note: Values are Beta Coefficients for direct effects derived through multiple regressions. Betas for the final dependent variable, Return for Second Year, are calculated using logistic regression due to its binomial response. P = path designation from dependent to independent variable.

Table 1

Beta Coefficients and Regression  $R^2$  For Path Model (N = 575)

	Perceived Cultural Distance	Satisfaction Peer Relations	Satisfaction Institutional Choice	Return for Second Year
Student's Cultural Characteristics	.20*	-.05	.04	.24*
Perceived Cultural Distance		.47*	.63*	.35
Satisfaction with Peer Relations			.48*	.27
Satisfaction with Institutional Choice				.51*
$R^2$	.04*	.24*	.41*	.05*

Note: \* $P < .05$ . Due to reciprocal effects, paths P32 and P43 are uncalculated in the final logistic regression of all independent variables to Return. Nagelkerke  $R^2$  is used for regression to Return.