Friends from home: Asset and liability to African American students attending a predominantly White institution.


Citation:
Astin’s (1984) Theory of Student Involvement and Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure and are among the most comprehensive and widely referenced models in student affairs literature for understanding the process of college student departure. While both theories share several common elements, one of their most salient similarities is the importance they place on students’ relationships with their peers. In revisiting his theory, Astin (1999) concluded that of all the ways of involving students in the life of the university, relationships with peers had the strongest influence on cognitive and affective development. Further, he noted that activities that isolated students from their peers, such as living at home, attending college part-time, or being employed off-campus, all negatively affected college student development and retention. Similarly, Tinto (1993) theorized that strong relationships with peers were crucial for students to become socially integrated into the university. Tinto believed that the inability to break away from relationships at home hampered social integration and led to attrition.

Although Astin’s (1984) and Tinto’s (1993) models have been tested and validated with a wide range of student populations (Astin, 1999; Boyle, 1989; Cabrera, 1992; Gillespie & Noble, 1992; Milem & Berger, 1997), questions have arisen regarding the applicability of these theories to students of color who attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Taylor and Miller (2002) argued that with few exceptions, theories and research on social integration have failed to investigate or acknowledge minority perspectives. Recent research that has examined the college involvement and social integration of minority students at PWIs has largely supported Astin’s and Tinto’s theories with regard to the impact of involvement in minority student organizations (Guiffrida, 2002; Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1997) and relationships with faculty (Braddock, 1981; Guiffrida, in press-a; Mayo, Murguia, and Padilla, 1995). However, research has not supported these theories with regard to the need to break away from families in order to become involved or socially integrated into PWIs. In fact, several researchers have found that students of color received strong support from their families and have suggested that strengthening ties to families may assist students of color in transitioning to PWIs (Cabrera, 1993; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999; Gonzalez, 2002; Guiffrida, in press-b; Hernandez, 2002; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1996; Sedlacek, 1987).

Although research indicates that Astin’s (1984) and Tinto’s (1993) theories should be modified to recognize the importance of families to students of color at PWIs, much less is known regarding the impact of friends from home on the involvement and social integration of students of color. In the limited research that has noted the impact of friends from home on minority student attrition, the results have been mixed. For example, Terenzini and associates (1994), in a qualitative study with 132 culturally diverse students at five different types of universities, noted that the importance of high school friends faded as students became integrated into college and that friends from home who did not go to college were perceived as hindering their college transitions. On the other hand, Gonzalez (2002), using in-depth interviews and observations collected over two years with two Chicano, first-generation college students attending a PWI, found that they perceived their visits to friends at home as an important source of cultural nourishment that was an asset to their college experiences. While neither study focused specifically on African American students, these results suggest that, like families,
friends from home have the potential to be both assets and liabilities to students of color attending PWIs.

However, the conditions under which friends from home support or hinder transitions to college remain unknown. Additionally, research has not investigated the influence of friends from home from the perspectives of African American students, whose perspectives may differ from those of White students or other students of color. The purpose of this study was to understand the conditions under which friends from home were perceived as assets or liabilities to the academic achievement and persistence of African American students attending a PWI. The results provide an important link for broadening the applicability of Astin’s (1984) and Tinto’s (1993) theories to African American students attending PWIs and offer student affairs practitioners deeper insight into the African American college student experience.

METHODS

Recently, it has been argued that quantitative measures alone have failed to capture the complexities involved in understanding the experiences of minority college students (Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). To understand the complex influence of friends from home from the students’ perspectives, qualitative methods based on the constant comparative method of data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used. Rather than attempting to make generalizations about the influence of all African American students’ friends, this study was designed to uncover patterns in students’ perceptions of these relationships in order to generate new hypotheses for future research.

SAMPLE

A total of 99 African Americans from a midsize (under 11,000 undergraduates), predominantly White (less than 7.5% African American) research institution located in the Northeastern United States volunteered to participate in this study. To increase the chances of gaining diverse perspectives regarding the influence of friends, purposeful sampling was used to recruit students from various levels of academic achievement. The sample included 15 students who had left the university prior to graduation (Leavers), 65 academically low-achieving students (Low Achievers), and 19 academically high-achieving students (High Achievers).

Fifteen students who had left prior to graduation between 1995-2000 agreed to participate in the study. Leaver’s class standing at the time of departure ranged from early in their first semester to midway through their senior year, with the average length of stay being 5.25 semesters. GPAs, collected from student self-reports and confirmed on the University’s student records system, ranged from a 0 to a 3.8. Four Leavers said they had transferred and completed their bachelor’s degrees, five said they were enrolled at other institutions at the time of the interview, and six said they had not taken classes since leaving the University.

Low Achievers volunteered to participate as part of their participation in a six-week academic enrichment program designed to serve students who self-identified as under-achieving, which was defined as academic probation, suspension, or motivation to improve grades for acceptance into graduate school. Of the 65 African American
participants, there were 14 freshman, 31 sophomores, 11 juniors, and 8 seniors. Grade point averages for Low Achievers at the time they inquired about the program ranged from 0 to 2.5 with the average GPA for this group being a 2.1.

To diversify the sample to include the perspectives of academically higher-achieving students, flyers were posted around campus soliciting the participation of students who self-identified as “high achieving African American students.” No GPA was specified on the advertisements so that students could self-identify as high achieving. High Achievers were also identified through snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), in which participants were asked to recommend other students for the study whom they believed to be high achieving. Nineteen high-achieving students volunteered to participate (2 freshman, 5 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 6 seniors). GPAs for this group ranged from a 2.8 to 3.9 with an average GPA of 3.2.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data were collected and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967). This inductive approach involves constant juggling on the part of the researcher between collecting data and developing working hypotheses. This iterative process continues until data reaches a point of saturation; that is, when the data become redundant and the researcher learns a decreasing amount relative to the time spent (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

All interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. Data were collected from Leavers by phone interviews and from High Achievers and Low Achievers in small focus groups and individual face-to-face interviews. Consistent with the constant comparative method (Glaser and Straus, 1967), interviews began open ended to allow the participants to shape what was studied. Interviews began with Leavers by asking them to describe the events leading up to the time they left the university and/or the circumstances under which they left. Interviews with Low Achievers and High Achievers began by asking them to describe things they believed to have been assets and liabilities to their college experiences. Follow up questions during these initial interviews were to ask students to elaborate on themes they mentioned or to provide the researcher with examples to help illustrate their points.

After an initial round of open coding with data from the first cycle of interviews, follow-up interviews were conducted using email with Leavers and in face-to-face individual sessions with Low Achievers and High Achievers. Consistent with the constant comparative method (Glazer & Strauss, 1967), questions in the follow-up interviews were more focused to allow further exploration of themes raised in the initial interviews. One example of a follow-up question was, “You mentioned that you were not as close to your friends from home after you started college. Can you explain what was different about the relationships?” Follow-up interviews are also important in allowing the researcher to check with members regarding working hypotheses and to collect additional information regarding their friends from home, such as whether or not they attended college.

The second round of analysis focused on analyzing the relative strength and intensity of the manifestations (Becker & Geer, 1960) by examining the sequence in which themes emerged and how often the theme arose relative to negative cases, which are instances that ran counter to the proposition that students shared a particular
perspective regarding the impact of their friends from home (Glaser & Straus, 1967). In addition, an extensive audit trail was used to reduce potential biases in data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This process included detailed documentation of field notes and memos that addressed researcher observations and reflections. The researcher also met weekly with a qualitative research group throughout the process of data collection and analysis. In these peer-debriefing meetings (Mishler, 2000) members monitored each other’s work to point out potential biases and illogical conclusions from the data. The researcher was assisted in the process of data analysis by QUALOG (Shelly & Sibert, 1992), a LOGLISP application designed to aid researchers in managing and organizing qualitative textual data.

RESULTS

While not every student in the study mentioned friends from home when describing assets and liabilities to their college experiences, the theme arose from students in all three levels of academic achievement. Further analysis, in which the researcher sought to generate explanations for the phenomenon via a process of inter-category integration (Shelly & Sibert, 1992), allowed salient differences to emerge among students vis-à-vis their level of academic achievement. The topic of friends from home arose most from Leavers and Low Achievers when they were asked to discuss reasons for their poor academic performance. However, High Achievers presented a more diverse picture of their relationships with friends from home, which included describing characteristics of friends who supported and hindered their transitions to college. Common themes that emerged when students described the impact of friends from home, as well as one negative case that indicates the complexity of these relationships will be presented. These results are intended to generate new hypotheses regarding the ways in which friends from home impact African American students’ transitions and persistence at PWIs.

LEAVERS AND LOW ACHIEVERS: FRIENDS AS LIABILITIES

Several Leavers talked about the fear of losing their connection to their friends from home as a reason for their attrition. In their attempts to integrate into the PWI, students said they began to adopt new social norms to be more congruent with their White peers. Becoming more diverse by learning to relate to White students was actually a goal many had established for themselves in attending a PWI. Unfortunately, this meant becoming less congruent with the norms from home and created a new set of problems, as this student explained.

It could be my own issues, thinking someone was always keeping an eye on me because I was attending a White school, and then coming back to [her predominantly Black community] and having to deal with people that I grew up with thinking that I had changed; like my ways of thinking and it wasn’t a good change. So it is weird and something I have been dealing with personally.
These students often felt as if they were caught between two worlds. While they attempted to adapt to their new community, they also struggled with the need to maintain a connection to their roots. To some extent, this struggle seems part of normal college student adjustment and transition. For African American students attending a PWI, where the culture may be perceived as drastically different from home, this struggle is exacerbated. When compounding this problem with friends from home who are sensitive to this change and apprehensive about losing them, the dilemma may become overwhelming. Some students in this quandary perceived their options as limited to either breaking ties with their friends from home, allowing them the freedom to change, or to quit school to return to the safety of their familiar surroundings. The decision of the student in the last example was to leave school in order to stay connected with her friends from home.

Friends from home were also described as a liability to the academic achievement of some the Low Achievers. Similar to the Leavers, Low Achievers described feeling disconnected from their White peers. Many of these students went home frequently to fulfill their social needs that were not perceived as being met at the university. However, these students believed that these frequent trips home contributed to their academic problems. Going home prevented them from becoming active in the social life of the college. Additionally, because their purpose in going home was to fulfill their need to socialize, they often did not complete school assignments at home, and, occasionally, would even skip classes in order to extend their stays. One student talked about missing many of his Monday morning classes in order to catch a later train back to school. This Low Achiever, when asked how his frequent trips home affected his academic performance stated, “Okay, I admit, I don't get work done when I go home. I can't keep doing it if I want to do well next year.”

HIGH ACHIEVERS: FRIENDS AS ASSETS AND LIABILITIES

Unlike data collected from Leavers and Low Achievers, High Achievers descriptions of relationships with friends from home were much more diverse. Some High Achievers indicated that transitioning to a PWI put a strain on their relationships with friends from home, especially with those friends who did not go to college. One student said that he felt these friends would “stunt my growth” because they did not share the same value and enthusiasm for improving themselves by attending post-secondary education. Another student said that he and his friends from home who went to college “weeded out” those who did not attend college because they were not as aspiring or ambitious as them. Another student admitted it was just too frustrating for her to associate with people “throwing their lives away by just staying home and doing nothing.” Instead of returning home to maintain these ties, these High Achievers chose to break away from these friends in order to successfully transition to college.

Other High Achievers said they broke ties with their friends from home who did not go to college because they felt their friends from home could not relate to them or their issues anymore. As this student pointed out, it was difficult for her to discuss her experiences with friends who were not familiar with college life.

I’ll talk about things with them and I’ll be like, ‘Oh, I went to this step show and these girls crossed at the step show and they’ll be like. ‘What
are you talking about? Crossed what? Crossed the street?’ They don’t know anything about college life or college activities so I don’t talk to them about that stuff.

However, there were many high-achieving students for whom friends from home continued to be a strong support to them. Several said that although they had established a network of friends at school, they still considered their friends from home their only true friends. According to these students, it was the people they grew up with, who knew their backgrounds, their families, and their struggles growing up who were some of their best supports, even while at college. Several High Achievers, even seniors who had been away from home for four years, said they were just never able to become as close with their new friends at school.

Some High Achievers said they felt fortunate to have friends from home who were also attending PWIs. These friends not only understood their issues growing up, but they also could relate to their struggles and successes at college. With these friends, they could discuss horror stories about bad professors, get advice about problems with roommates, or share their academic triumphs and not feel as if they were alienating themselves or bragging about their accomplishments. In addition to feeling understood and comfortable with these friends, students also described gaining a great deal of motivation from their friends at other colleges. The sense from these students was that if others from their high schools or neighborhoods could make it at college, especially a PWI, than they could as well. This student, when asked to discuss the influence of his home community on his education, talked about how important it was for him to draw support from his friends from home who were attending college.

I am motivated from my peers who are also in college who are graduating, some here but mostly my friends from home, the few who went on to college, so we keep each other motivated in that sense. And just to know that there is a better life out there, a better way to live. Whether it is the current way I am living, just being poor, or less wealth, I understand by watching them that college is the way to get beyond that and improve my situation.

However, the issue of whom to stay in contact with from home was not as clear-cut for the High Achievers as these data suggest. There were several High Achievers who, while maintaining relationships with friends from home who went to college, also talked about the support they had given and received from their friends who did not attend college. Rather than breaking away from these friends, for fear of being held back or distracted from their goals, several High Achievers talked about the importance of maintaining these relationships. Although they admitted these friends could not relate to their issues at college, many students felt their friends staunchly supported their efforts to make something of themselves by obtaining a college degree. This support came in various forms, from calling regularly to update them on neighborhood events, to visiting them at school, to one student who said her friend from home occasionally sent her money to help with bills. Maintaining these relationships allowed students to excel at college while still feeling connected to their communities. One senior shared the
following example that illustrated the important support she gained from a friend from home who did not go to college:

I remember calling my friend who didn’t go to college when I was having problems with my friends here and being like, ‘Oh my God! I hate it here! I don’t like it. I miss you!’ So [my friends from home] know about everything. They are the friends I can tell everything to. I have actually become closer with some of them since I came to school.

While several students expressed that they had received support from friends from home, there was one High Achiever who spoke of the support she lent to these friends as an important ingredient to her own success at college. When asked to elaborate on how helping friends from home had helped her succeed at college, this High Achiever explained why these relationships were so important to her.

I have friends who have gone the wrong way in life and I actually find it more important to keep in touch with them than anybody else because I want to still offer them encouragement. Sometimes it is not always received well because they may be unhappy with what they are doing and they look at you like you are passing judgment but I let them know that I am coming in love and to let them know they deserve so much better in life and they are settling for less. Even if I don’t necessarily talk to them about what they are doing, they feel the need to come and tell me they are doing good stuff. Like if I am like, how are you doing? They will be like, ‘girl, I am going back to school’ or ‘I’m about to get this job.’ I didn’t ask you that but they look at me like I am doing well and in school and she probably is going to look at me like I am not doing anything with my life. So, I do feel the need to keep in touch with those people because when I go back home, they are going to be the ones around me and they still have a place in my heart. Just check on them every now and then and sometimes you will get people who are serious about it.

Because her relationships with friends from home differed from the other students in this study, I sought to understand her perspective better. I asked her to provide an example that illustrated her commitment to her friends from home and she shared the following example of how she provided encouragement to her friend who had a child and had dropped out of high school.

She called me and was like, ‘I have to do better. I want my son to look at me and be proud’, and I was like, you can do it. She called me 3 weeks ago and told me she got her GED and I was like, that is so wonderful. I wish I could say I had something to do with it; I didn’t but at least I was there for her to listen rather than some people who would be like, there’s no point, you already have a child; you have already thrown your life away. I feel like I would want someone to do that for me if I went the wrong way.
This High Achiever felt that she motivated her friends from home to improve themselves by maintaining close relationships with them. At the very least, she believed that the positive example she set proved to some friends that they too could go to college and succeed. In other cases, she provided more active advice, support, and encouragement for them to better themselves by advancing their education. As she pointed out, friends who did not attend college did not always receive her message favorably. However, she firmly believed that maintaining these relationships made a difference and, thus, allowed her to feel as if she was giving back to her home community while she succeeded at college.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE**

This was a small, single-institutional sample in which students from each level of academic achievement were not equally represented. Certainly, more research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn regarding the influences of African American students’ friends from home. However, the patterns that emerged from the perspectives of the African American students allowed the researcher to identify a set of conditions under which friends from home became assets or liabilities to African American students attending a PWI.

Several Leavers and Low Achievers said they feared that by adapting to their new environments, they were distancing themselves from their friends at home. As a result, some Leavers chose to return home rather than risk losing these important friendships. On the other hand, Low Achievers who perceived the same dilemma chose to go home frequently to socialize with friends from home even though they recognized that it hampered their academic achievement and prevented them from becoming actively involved in the life of the university. Additionally, some High Achievers found it necessary to sever ties with friends from home who did not go to college because they felt they could not relate to them anymore. Other High Achievers said they broke away from friends from home because they feared that they might drag them down by their lack of ambition. According to the students in this study, friends from home have the potential to become liabilities when they express fear or disapproval of students’ adaptations to college or when they are unable to relate to students’ college lives.

However, the divergent perspectives shared by several High Achievers suggest a set of conditions under which friends from home become assets to African American students at PWIs. According to some High Achievers, friends from home who attended other PWIs can become strong assets because students felt these friends could relate to them and their issues. Other High Achievers said that friends from home who went to college provided them with the motivation and encouragement they needed to persevere at the PWI. However, there were also High Achievers who described their friends from home who did not attend college as assets to their college experiences. Students indicated that although these friends from home could not always relate to their issues at school, they became important assets by providing emotional support, connections to their home communities, and, in one case, allowing a student to feel she was giving back to her community by being a positive role model and encouraging others.

These data partially support Astin’s (1984) and Tinto’s (1993) theories, which emphasize the need to break ties at home in order to become involved and/or integrated
into the university. However, data from High Achievers indicate that it is not necessary for all African American students to break away from friends from home to succeed at a PWI. This result suggests that theories seeking to explain African American students’ transitions and persistence decisions at PWIs should recognize the diverse and complex nature of the relationships that some students of color have with their friends from home.

Based primarily on the ideas from Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993), student affairs professionals have worked diligently to develop comprehensive programming designed to facilitate connections among peers and to discourage students from going home frequently (Fox, Spooner, Utterback, & Barbieri, 1996). These data support the need for student affairs professionals to continue to strive to implement programs and supportive services that facilitate involvement and social integration of African American students who attend PWIs. However, the results also indicate the need for student affairs professionals to recognize and value the support that some African American students receive from their friends from home. College counselors, residence hall staff, and student activities personnel should strive to facilitate involvement and social integration into the PWI that does not alienate students from members of their home communities.

Future research is needed to confirm the hypotheses presented in this study regarding the relationships among African American students attending PWIs and their friends from home. It is also important to broaden this research to understand the impact of friends from home to other underrepresented minority populations such as Latinos and Native Americans, as their experiences may differ significantly from those of African Americans. This line of research will assist student affairs professionals in understanding the experiences of students of color who attend PWIs in order to more effectively support them.
REFERENCES


