The Problem

• Low rates of student persistence in community colleges
• Traditional frameworks of student persistence (i.e., Tinto) are assumed to be less applicable to community college populations
• Community college responses to persistence frameworks, such as implementing student support services, have had minimal impact in increasing retention and persistence.
The Study

• Exploratory study of student persistence in community colleges
• Longitudinal and qualitative
• Examine the process by which students choose to remain enrolled or not
  – Implications for theory
  – Implications for practice
Theoretical Framework: Tinto’s Integration Framework

• Integration encourages persistence in college

• Integration occurs along two dimensions
  – Academic integration: attachment to the intellectual life of the college
  – Social integration: connections outside of the classroom
  – Analytically distinct but interact with and enhance each other

• Integration is encouraged by both formal and informal systems within institutions
Integration and Community College Students

• Thought to be less applicable
  – Fewer opportunities for social integration
  – Efforts to increase integration, i.e., student support services, have not increased persistence

• Some evidence supporting Tinto’s framework for community college students (Deil-Amen, 2005)
  – Measures of academic and social integration were related to persistence
  – Argues that the two constructs are not as analytically distinct as commonly assumed
Methods

• Random sample of first-time community college students enrolled in two urban community colleges – supplemented with a snowball technique

• Interviewed during second semester of enrollment and six months later, whether they re-enrolled or not
  – Interview 1, N=44
  – Interview 2, N=36

• Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 1 hour
  – Participants were paid $50 per interview
  – Interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis

• Analysis
  – Coded for student perceptions of campus experiences and social relationships; sense of belongingness in the institution; types of social networks students were a part of; and demographic characteristics
  – Read coded data thematically
Findings: Integration and Persistence

• Community college students report developing a sense of integration
  – 31 students (70%) reported feeling a sense of belonging on campus

• Integration was related to persistence
  – Of the 40 students whose fall 2006 enrollment status was known to us:
    • 90% of those who were integrated persisted
    • Two-third of those who were not integrated persisted

• Support Tinto’s theory that integration is related to persistence

• Refute notion that integration is not important for community college students
Findings: Information Networks and Integration

- Participation in information networks is a key mechanism encouraging integration for community college students
  - Information networks = social ties that facilitated the transfer of institutional knowledge and procedures
- 27 students (61%) reported engaging in an information network; 17 students (38%) did not
- Information networks were related to integration
  - 84% of students who were coded as integrated reported being part of an information network
  - 8% (1 of 13) of students who were not integrated into the college reported being part of an information network
How do information networks facilitate integration?

• Information networks encourage campus connections
  – Help students navigate the social space of the college, learn about the resources available to them outside of the classroom, and feel connected to a broader institution

• Information networks strengthen social relationships
  – Relationships predicated on information exchange appear to be stronger than other relationships
  – Make academic life fun and meaningful, and encourage attachment to the institution

• Information networks help students access good information, make good decisions, and feel confident that they can be successful in college and belong there
Where do information networks come from?

• Given that they promote integration, it is important to question where information networks come from, and whether they are academic or social
  – Tinto’s framework would predict that, for community college students, they are academic
• Students generally report developing networks through in-class experiences, and networks created through extra-curricular activities are not as strong
• However, academic and social integration were intertwined, even within the classroom.
  – Social relationships began as academic relationships and were rooted in academic study
  – Over time, they expanded outside of the classroom and facilitated social connections
Conclusions

• Tinto’s Integration Framework is applicable to community college students

• Integration in the community college is facilitated by information networks

• Information networks are generally developed in academic settings, but can also encourage social integration

• Academic and social integration are not distinct; they are developed simultaneously
Implications

• For theory:
  – Tinto’s Integration Framework is applicable to community college students
  – Integration in the community college may, however, look different than it does at four-year institutions
    • Future research should examine the ways that social integration occurs in the community college, rather than assuming that it does not exist
  – The intertwining of academic and social integration may occur at other types of institutions, too

• For practice:
  – Because integration is related to persistence, find ways to encourage student integration in the community college
  – Focus on pedagogies, like student-centered teaching, that help create information networks