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Using Segmented Assimilation Theory to Enhance Conceptualization of College Participation

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## Introduction

Minority student persistence in college is a key concern in higher education research. The most developed and commonly used conceptual framework to assess reasons for persistence in higher education is the model of integration developed by Tinto (1975, 1993). The integration model examines the relationship between student characteristics, enrollment, involvement behaviors, and persistence and attainment. Student characteristics include demographic, family, and high school background characteristics; involvement behaviors address how the student engages in academic, social, employment, or other kinds of activities within the institution. Persistence (also called retention) is defined as remaining enrolled in the institution, presumably until degree attainment or completion.

In this framework, enrollment, attendance, institution type, and student behaviors that influence student involvement in the institution are also assumed to impact students' feelings of membership and participation in institutional life. Thus, the level of participation influences students' decisions to stay enrolled and attain a degree, to transfer to another institution, or to discontinue enrollment in postsecondary education. The two kinds of participation and involvement in college are described as academic and social integration. Academic integration includes indicators like faculty-student interactions, student involvement in research projects, and time spent on homework. Social integration includes indicators like participation in student groups, friendships, experiences in residence halls, and other peer group interactions.

Tinto's model, some have suggested, overly emphasizes individual rather than social factors, does not address minority students' particular cultural backgrounds, and may implicitly blame students for their departure when, in fact, other social, cultural, and environmental factors may be influencing their lower participation (Braxton, 2000a; Laden, Milem, & Crowson, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1992). In the field of the sociology of immigration, analogous debates have emerged about whether and how immigrants do or ought to assimilate into American culture. In this paper, I explore how ideas from a recent development in the field of immigration studies, "segmented assimilation theory" (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1999), might be applied to conceptually refine the predominant model of student retention.

Based on more recent scholarship about immigrants' participation in American life, segmented assimilation theory posits that rather than following a uniform path toward assimilation into American society, immigrants pursue diverse paths and become involved in society in different ways. In this essay, I argue that segmented assimilation theory's concepts can be applied to describe diverse students' processes of adapting to college life. I begin with a discussion

of the theory of integration and critiques that have been offered of it, and illustrate how debates around integration theory parallel those in the sociology of immigration. I continue by describing how contextual, social, and structural factors considered in segmented assimilation theory that affect newcomers' acculturation to the United States are analogous to elements relevant to the retention outcomes of students of color. Generally, research indicates that how newcomers are received in the new country and in college affects how they participate in new cultures, implying that research on persistence should address this in more depth.

While not conclusive, research in both fields suggests that affiliating with one's ethnic culture as one navigates life in the new country or in college, paradoxically, may *enhance* one's ability to engage in higher education institutions and subsequently to attain positive educational outcomes. Accordingly, I discuss how a concept derived from segmented assimilation theory, "selective acculturation" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), might be employed as an analogy to understand this dynamic among students of color in higher education. Following this, I briefly discuss how issues raised by segmented assimilation theory align with those in emergent student development theories that address minority student experiences. In addition, I address selected limitations of segmented assimilation theory and their relevance to the study of minority student retention. Finally, I discuss the implications of the use of segmented assimilation theory as an analogy for understanding the dynamics of retention of students of color.

### **Integration Theory and Critique**

Basing his theory of integration on the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim (1951), Tinto argued that students may leave the college community because they do not feel membership in the community or are not well enough integrated into it. In other words, they may feel a sense of "anomie," or lack of belonging, in the college, similar to Durkheim's view that the people he studied may have committed suicide because of a feeling of moral and cultural detachment from the community. Accordingly, Tinto suggested that the more students feel they are a part of the college context, the more likely they will be to stay. Tinto also drew on the work of Van Gennep (1960) in conceiving of the idea of college as a "rite of passage" that fosters student development from one stage of life to the next, in this case toward becoming integrated into the fabric of American society.

Tinto's model of integration has been critiqued for implying that all students entering college are coming from and moving toward being members of

the same culture, that they must come to share common cultural and moral values, and that they must conform to the norms of the dominant culture of the institution (Attinasi, 1989; Tierney, 1992). For the purposes of this paper, “dominant culture” refers to the institution’s traditional cultural norms, values, and practices, which, in the context of U.S. history, tend to reflect white upper- and middle-class orientations. Tierney (1992) points out that for Native Americans and other underrepresented students, entering college may not be a smooth and linear rite of passage, but pose a disjuncture in their life course in which they must leave one community or culture and its set of values and norms and enter an entirely new one. Tierney highlights the individualist emphasis of Tinto’s constructs and measures, as the sets of variables included in the theory focus on the extent to which the individual adjusts to the environment rather than the extent to which the college environment might adjust to serve or support the student. Broadly, Tierney implies that this model overlooks that going to college might not be the same rite of passage for all students and that the emphasis on integration implies a view that all students should conform to the same cultural norms. He calls the view that all college students must adopt common cultural and moral norms a “social integrationist” perspective and advances a “multicultural” approach that would take into account different cultural perspectives that students bring to the institution, and would value the development of different subcultures within the college community.

Tierney suggests that the theory of integration may influence the way that administrators and faculty interpret the reasons that students from minority groups may have more difficulty adjusting to, participating in, and completing college. His analysis of administrators’ comments about Native American students implies that prevailing “social integrationist” discourse about student retention influences some higher education personnel to believe that Native American students’ inability to let go of their cultural values, such as more communal orientations that may not be conducive to the competitive environment of college, may underpin their failure to stay in college (1992, pp. 629-630). He quotes one administrator as saying that Native Americans “have a terrible problem with acculturation” (p. 629). Such a perspective, Tierney argues, places blame on students and absolves higher education staff members of the responsibility to make changes that would support these students to succeed in college. It also ignores the importance and relevance of the cultural values that students bring with them, implicitly denigrates cultural values that may seem at odds with those of the institution, and assumes that all students must undergo a similar transition process. Administrators who hold such values may also negatively influence the way that students see themselves as members of the institution.

In the reality of an increasingly diverse college student population, the lower retention rate of minority students calls for new epistemological

frameworks and theoretical insights into how students from different backgrounds enter and negotiate the college environment. To higher education researchers, Tierney says, “We need to utilize different theoretical models rather than those that insist upon an integrative framework that assume an individualist stance” (1992, pp. 615-616). Tinto agrees in his later work that students’ cultural differences must be addressed in theories of student integration and college community membership (1993). More recently, several scholars have called for refining the theory to adequately reflect the experiences of diverse students through conducting empirical research and drawing from other bodies of literature to inform thinking in this area (Braxton, 2000a; Braxton, 2000b). Discussing the importance of considering college climate variables in research on departure, Baird (2000) highlights the “importance of examining related literatures of theoretical and empirical relevance...The point is not that we should abandon Tinto’s conceptions but that we should use the theoretical debates in these analogous models to sharpen and reconsider the meanings we attach to the conceptions and develop more appropriate measures” (pp. 74-75). Accordingly, the next section of this paper considers integration theory in light of recent analogous debates in the literature on the sociology of immigration.

### **Segmented Assimilation and Student Integration**

According to some recent scholars of immigration (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1999; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) most of the previous scholarship on the assimilation of immigrants has assumed that all immigrant groups follow a similar path toward participation in the activities of the host society, or a “straight-line” process of assimilation toward becoming people with economic and social characteristics like those of the white middle class. This process of assimilation, called “classical assimilation,” (Zhou, 1999) is similar to the vision that all college students follow similar paths of social integration into higher education institutions.

While the process of immigration and assimilation obviously covers a longer time span (across more years and generations) than the entry into and completion of college, recent developments in theories of assimilation may be relevant to the study of persistence in higher education for several reasons. First, the debate about whether the process of assimilation in immigration is the same for members of all ethnic groups relates to critiques of the social integrationist perspective in the higher education literature. These criticisms suggest that the path toward participating in college life may differ for members of different groups according to their race, ethnicity, gender, class, and/or sexuality. Second, the literature in immigration analyzes how people move from one culture to

another and how they participate in this new culture. Therefore, its theoretical insights may apply to the experiences of minority students who may be coming from families and cultures less familiar with higher education and who are therefore less likely to experience linear rites of passage. In this way, college students, especially those from minority and less traditionally represented groups (including low-income, first-generation, disabled, and older students), may be seen as immigrants to new environments. Third, based on current demographic patterns and trends, immigrants and children of immigrants will constitute an increasing number of students in secondary and higher education (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p.19). As higher education institutions serve students from increasingly diverse racial-ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, they must recognize that many of these students may be like immigrants to the college environment in the sense that the institutional culture is relatively unfamiliar to them. Higher education researchers using a social ecological perspective believe that students are not only transformed by entering college but that they transform the college environment itself (Dey & Hurtado, 1994, 2000). Accordingly, higher education institutions must address the needs of populations including immigrants, children of immigrants, students of color and low-income students as they increase their enrollments in these key sites of social mobility.

Examining the experiences of more recent and diverse (post-1965) immigrant groups, Portes and Zhou (1993) have argued that members of different immigrant groups may follow different paths and participate in different segments of society, rather than inevitably move toward the same kind of participation. In their model they suggest that three broad kinds of variables shape these processes of assimilation and account for variations in immigrants' participation in U.S. society: individual level factors, family level variables, and the larger social context the immigrants encounter in the new country. In this paper, I highlight social context variables as providing insights for conceptualizing how institutional and social factors affect minority students' participation in higher education. While individual and family level variables are obviously critical influences on student persistence, I focus on social context variables because of their particular relevance to the debates on the participation of minority students in college and because they involve factors that can be addressed by higher education administrators and policymakers.

*Context of Reception Variables: Governmental Policies,  
Social Perceptions, Ethnic Communities*

Portes and Zhou (1993) identify the social context that immigrants encounter in the new country as "the context of reception." The context of reception consists of three things: the host government's policies toward

accepting immigrants; society's attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and prejudices about immigrants; and the qualities of the ethnic communities (especially the immigrants' own ethnic group) present when the immigrants arrive. In this view, the context of reception affects and interacts with individual and family background to shape how immigrants become involved in the host country's cultural, social, and economic practices. For example, the relatively positive reception of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, as exemplified in policies that allowed them to resettle and provided them with financial aid, and the presence of strong social networks in particular geographical locations, may have helped those with fewer economic and social resources to attain social mobility (Zhou & Bankston, 1996). By contrast, the relatively negative reception of Mexican American immigrants over the past century, including "repeated waves of nativist hostility," policies of deportation, and limitations on their ability to settle in the United States, may in part have contributed to their lower levels of economic and social mobility (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 277).

Similar to how governmental policies affect the reception of immigrants, higher education policies may affect the extent to which students feel membership in and participate in the college community. Just as there have been quotas barring or limiting immigration of certain groups in the past, there have been quotas limiting the entrance of members of particular ethnic or racial groups into higher education. Such policies may operate on the level of higher education institutions themselves, on the level of the state in which higher education institutions are located, and on the national level. For a long time, individual institutions systematically excluded minorities and women from participation in most higher education institutions. Limits on the admission of Jews were enacted at particular institutions in the early twentieth century and did not disappear at some elite institutions until the 1960s. More recently, there was concern that the number of Asian students admitted to colleges, especially elite colleges, was being limited because so many were qualified to be admitted to college. The increasing presence of administrators from these groups in the universities and pressure from states (in the case of New York institutions) resulted in lifts on exclusionary quotas (Perlman & Waldinger, 2001).

At the national level, affirmative action legislation was passed in the 1960s to limit discrimination against and exclusion of minorities and women from higher education. In response to a court case challenging the use of affirmative action, a Supreme Court decision in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case argued that race and ethnicity could be used, among other factors in the admissions process, to broaden the diversity of the student body admitted to higher education [438 U.S. 265 (1978)]. These national policies and guidelines created a more positive context of reception for minority groups to enter higher education.

More recently, the perception that affirmative action policies were unfairly admitting unqualified minority students at the expense of more qualified non-minority students resulted in challenges to, and in some cases, bans on affirmative action in California, Texas, Florida, Georgia, Washington, and Michigan. For example, California's passage of the popular referendum Proposition 209 led to banning the consideration of race and ethnicity in the admissions process for public colleges and the provision of outreach and support programs targeting minority students. This represents an example of state-level policies affecting the capacity for minority students to enter and succeed in higher education. Collectively, these institutional, state, and national policies and guidelines have affected the exclusion and inclusion of minorities in higher education. Like immigration policies that limit or broaden access for certain groups, higher education policies may affect different students differently and may directly or indirectly influence their ability to enter and integrate into college life.

The second level of the context of reception is the social perception of members of minority groups. These include stereotypes or prejudices that the host society holds about newcomers. Research suggests that racial stereotypes may affect the assimilation paths of certain immigration groups more than others (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Immigrants with darker skin may be able to assimilate less easily than lighter-skinned immigrants because of racist stereotypes. Applying these concepts to higher education, negative perceptions and stereotypes about members of minority groups may affect how they are able to participate in college life. To take an example from early in the twentieth century, Jews who entered elite institutions reported experiencing slurs concerning their heritage and daily social discrimination through being barred from certain clubs and activities (Steinberg, 1981/1989). Hence, their capacity to achieve integration into campus life was limited.

While campus climates have generally improved for minorities, racist incidents continue to occur in overt and covert forms (Altbach, 1991; Chang, 1999). Recent scholarship on racial "microaggressions," defined as subtle yet cumulatively harmful acts of racism, suggests that racist attitudes affect the daily lives of underrepresented students (Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Such incidents and experiences of racism can negatively affect students' feelings of membership in and commitment to an institution, as well as their desire to participate in social and academic activities within the institution. For example, minority students can suffer a stigma associated with the perception that they were admitted solely because of racial preferences due to affirmative action, rather than their academic abilities. This can happen even when there is evidence that almost all minority students on a campus were *not* admitted under such preferences (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Such perceptions may cause



minority students to feel unwelcome on campus, and consequently, to leave college.

Furthermore, such stereotypes could affect minority participation in college in terms of a self-fulfilling prophecy that they do not belong in and cannot succeed in the environment. Research on the phenomenon of “stereotype threat” has suggested that on high-stakes tests, minorities may perform worse because of the negative stereotypes associated with their group’s past performance on the test (Steele, 1997). Similarly, being surrounded by negative perceptions of minority students’ academic abilities and rights to be admitted to the institution could reinforce this stereotype threat and adversely affect minority students’ outcomes. Conversely, with respect to other kinds of stereotypes, the “model minority” stereotype which deems Asian American students as academically top-performing may put added social pressure on them to succeed as well as lead institutions to overlook their particular challenges and needs (Escueta & O’Brien, 1995; Sue & Abe, 1995). Additionally, the discourse that administrators use to interpret why minority students leave higher education may negatively affect the participation of the latter in college. The assumptions administrators make may influence the extent to which they develop programs and policies to support these students. The common view that the student must leave behind his or her culture in order to succeed in college suggests that the individual must conform to the institution’s norms, rather than that the institution has a responsibility to serve diverse students.

The third level of the context of reception is the communal reception of members of the ethnic group. In the context of immigration, this involves the extent to which co-ethnic communities are present to support members as they arrive in the host country, as well as the quality of support such communities can offer. The extent to which a new immigrant may be able to live in geographic proximity to other immigrants of the same ethnicity may allow her access to social and economic resources that aid in her ability to construct a life in the new host country as well as protect her from the stereotypes and prejudices of the larger society.

Similarly, in the context of higher education, the presence of students from like backgrounds may affect their ability to persist. Racial-ethnic student body composition indicates the relative presence of ethnic minorities. Some scholars have called this “structural diversity” and argue that it supports college climates that are more multicultural and inclusive of students from different backgrounds (Gurin, 1999). Furthermore, this kind of diversity has been found to be associated with positive kinds of learning experiences in and out of the classroom that improve learning outcomes for minority students (Gurin, 1999). Another way to examine this issue is to look at institutions that are comprised mainly of a minority ethnic group. In a comparison of outcomes for African American

students at predominantly and historically black colleges, another study finds that students at historically black colleges have better outcomes and theorizes that this may be due to stronger social and institutional support they encounter there (Allen, 1992). Laden, Milem, and Crowson's (2000) review of the research suggests that at historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and tribal colleges, students from underrepresented groups are more likely to complete degrees, perhaps because of more supportive climates.

Ethnic communities or subcultures may also affect minority participation in college. Within higher education institutions, including those that are predominantly White, racial and ethnic associations, such as theme houses and clubs, can also provide students with the opportunity to associate with others from similar backgrounds and may offer them needed academic, social, and emotional resources. Other literature suggests that participation in ethnic clubs, activist groups, and protest activities may enhance minorities' college experience and ability to persist (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). A social integrationist perspective might see ethnic associations, activism, and protest as detrimental to students' ability to persist, for example through the idea that ethnic association leads to campus "balkanization." In this view, because minority students are not participating more fully in the dominant culture of the university, they are more likely to depart from college (D'Souza, 1991). An alternative perspective, the "multicultural" approach (Tierney, 1992) posits that being in the presence of other students from similar backgrounds may support student success and participation in college.

Figure 1 summarizes these context of reception factors as applied to college student experiences and illustrates the connections between segmented assimilation theory variables and associated examples of variables related to the entry into college. The first level of context of reception factors, host government policy, highlights the importance of the larger social and political climate in shaping students' participation in college. Examples of this dimension include the national, state, and institutional admissions policies that affect access to college. The second level of societal perceptions, stereotypes, and discourse includes such factors as daily racist incidents, differential access to participation in social clubs, and encounters with stereotypes and assumptions about why students leave college. All of these influence minority students' college experiences. Finally, the quality of ethnic communities is associated with the importance of indicators such as racial-ethnic composition of the student body, mission of the university and extent to which it addresses minority students' needs, and the activities of ethnic clubs and theme houses in creating an inviting environment for students of color.

Figure 1

*Factors Related to the Context of Reception as Applied to College Student Experiences*

<b>Immigration</b>	<b>Entry into college</b>
Host government policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National admissions policies: legislation, court cases</li> <li>• State admissions policies: propositions</li> <li>• Institutional admissions policies: quotas</li> </ul>
Societal perceptions, stereotypes, and discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily racist incidents</li> <li>• Access to or prohibition from participating in social clubs</li> <li>• Stereotypes and assumptions about racial-ethnic groups</li> <li>• Stereotypes and assumptions about why students leave college</li> </ul>
Quality of ethnic communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student body racial-ethnic composition</li> <li>• Institutional mission and support for racial-ethnic groups</li> <li>• Ethnic clubs</li> <li>• Ethnic theme houses</li> </ul>

In addition to the evidence cited previously, recent reviews of the influence of college climate on minority student persistence suggest links between minority students' perceptions of a positive or negative campus climate and feelings of belonging, integration, and retention (Baird, 2000; Hurtado, 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Context of reception factors highlight a range of external and internal institutional variables that may influence students' perceptions of the campus climate. Similarly, Hurtado et al.'s (1999) campus climate framework and review of empirical work posits that the "historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion" of minorities, "structural diversity" (student body composition), "psychological climate" (student perceptions of the campus environment), and "behavioral dimensions" (the nature of student and staff interactions and formation of associations within and across racial groups) are interrelated influences that affect minority students' participation in college life (p.4). The evidence points to the importance of including these indicators and variables in studies of persistence, especially with respect to minority students' experiences. In quantitative studies, these variables may be drawn from survey instruments or used as ways of interpreting variance. Although Tinto's integration model is quantitatively oriented, qualitative research may also employ

these dimensions of the context of reception in interview protocols, observation guides, or in interpreting study results. Taking into account these factors helps illuminate how students' experiences of persistence are embedded in social and structural processes, and how such processes can be incorporated into the model of integration. These contextual factors mediate how students are influenced by and participate in the college environment. In other words, campus climate factors are related to Tinto's constructs of institutional experiences, including academic performance, faculty/staff interactions, extracurricular activities, and peer-group interactions. While not specifying the exact causal links between these factors and others in the integration model, the scheme suggested here is intended as a first step in envisioning how these indicators might be included in understanding minority students' experiences with respect to persistence.

### *Selective Acculturation and Integration*

In research on immigrants' experiences, a criticism of classical or straight-line assimilation theory is that it assumes that immigrants must let go of their ethnic/cultural ways and adopt the ways of the host culture in order to participate in social institutions. More recent research has called into question whether discarding traditions (such as losing the ability to speak the old country's language) always results in better outcomes for immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Importantly, segmented assimilation theorists argue that, for some immigrants, retention of ethnic cultural ties may not necessarily inhibit participation, but may actually facilitate participation in the new culture. For example, evidence from Zhou and Bankston's (1996) work on Vietnamese youth shows how, paradoxically, intense participation in Vietnamese community activities (non-acculturation in the classical view) may actually facilitate assimilation into American society. Through strong Vietnamese community networks, Vietnamese students are encouraged to do well in U.S. schools and thereby participate successfully in this critical social institution for economic mobility. Segmented assimilation theorists use the term "selective acculturation" to describe this sort of adaptation in which ethnic cultural values and practices support participation in mainstream U.S. society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In selective acculturation, students and families retain certain cultural values and practices at the same time that they engage in selected mainstream practices of the host society. This process of "cultural shift" results in a bicultural existence and is supported by conditions such as a co-ethnic community of a sufficient size, engagement in different kinds of institutions (such as church and school), and a pace of cultural change that allows certain elements of the home culture to be sustained (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

While selective acculturation is used in segmented assimilation theory to explain parent-child relationships with respect to adoption of the ways of the host culture, the concept might also be applied to college students' feelings of membership and participation in institutional life with respect to how students relate to their past family and community experiences as they enter this new environment. A strict assimilationist or social integrationist view would argue that college students must fully adopt the norms of the college environment in order to succeed. For example, Richard Rodriguez, in his autobiography *Hunger for Memory* (1982), describes how he had to distance himself from his Mexican cultural background and identify with Anglo-American norms in order to succeed in his education and become truly American.

Selective acculturation, on the other hand, could be used to understand how students from different backgrounds might not need to fully adopt the dominant cultural norms of college in order to succeed. They may be able to blend aspects of their less mainstream identity with selected parts of the more mainstream college culture. For example, in reference to the role of ethnic associations discussed previously, minority students may find that living in an ethnic theme house or participating in the activities of an ethnic club may allow them to feel more a part of the college and may enhance their academic achievement. One study found that African American students on predominantly white campuses who participated in African American student groups reported higher levels of satisfaction with campus life and lower rates of departure from college (Davis, 1991). A broad review of the literature, in fact, has suggested that student associations organized around race may benefit students of color with respect to their satisfaction with their institutions and retention (Smith, et. al., 1997). Selective acculturation, then, might be adapted to mean selective integration in college student experiences, which may involve the student blending parts of her ethnic identity and past cultural, home, and/or community ways with skills and understandings developed in college.

### **Linkages with Recent Developments in Higher Education Literature**

Scholars calling for new theoretical insights on minority student retention have drawn on literature about biculturalization (Valentine, 1971) and dual socialization (de Anda, 1984) to challenge the notion that minority students must leave their home cultures to enter another and that these students must adopt to the dominant culture in order to succeed (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The concept of selective acculturation provides one way of envisioning how a bicultural orientation – i.e. participating in two or more cultures, such as college, family, and community – may influence student persistence positively as well as negatively. Hurtado and Carter have proposed the concept of a “sense of

belonging” (1997) that may be more meaningful than commonly used measures of integration in understanding minority student persistence. Their “sense of belonging” construct takes into account the hostile or negative climate that minority students may encounter. Moreover, their research suggests that multiple affiliations with social, religious, familial, and other communities outside of as well as within college may contribute to Latino students’ sense of belonging within an institution. Their work prompted Laden et al. (2000) to consider redefining the concept of student “residence” in a college to incorporate these other communities. As with selective acculturation, membership in these multiple and sometimes external communities does not have to be mutually exclusive nor at odds with supporting college persistence.

In a recent critique of research on college student development, Tanaka (2002) argues that survey instruments related to Tinto’s model of integration, along with other commonly used frameworks of student involvement (Astin, 1984) and quality of effort (Pace, 1992) address the modernist task of measuring student cognitive and personal development but do not adequately take into account the “racial demographic shifts, issues of power, or cultural norms that may impact student development” (pp. 265-266). He critiques Tinto’s model for not addressing students’ multiple subject positions along different dimensions such as gender, race, class, and sexuality; whether classroom practices address students’ background; power relations affecting students’ experiences; and the importance of historically and socially constructed dimensions of race. He also argues that commonly used frameworks and survey instruments do not take into account the influence of institutional culture on a student or how the student’s own cultural location in relation to the institution affects his/her experience.

By addressing students’ relationships with family and external communities, selective acculturation acknowledges that students may have multiple affiliations and subject positions that influence their persistence in college. This relates to the postmodern idea that students have complex and multidimensional identities (Rhoads, 1997; Tanaka, 2002). The use of the word selective also implies that students have agency in constructing and negotiating their identities within and beyond the institutional context of the college. The application of ideas from segmented assimilation theory to integration theory begins to acknowledge the complex positionalities of students in the collegiate context. It can potentially address individuals’ relationships with institutional power structures, considerations of how they find a sense of themselves in relation to others, and attention to the local social, economic, and historical contexts they inhabit (Tanaka, 2002).

By acknowledging different paths of participation in community life, segmented assimilation theory as applied to the study of college student persistence highlights possible differences in students’ trajectories. This approach

can be combined with an interactionist perspective that emphasizes students' perceptions of their environments and hence is amenable to conducting research seeking to understand students' voices, power relations, subject positions, and standpoints for making sense of reality. Students' different positionalities raise the issue of whether all variables have equal importance for all students (Tanaka, 2002). For example, research on Latino students' feelings of belonging has suggested that similar variables may have different meanings for different students—that is, they may have different influences on a sense of belonging, depending upon the students' ethnic group (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). By making the assumption that students from different ethnic groups follow different paths of participation in college life, segmented assimilation theory applied to integration theory provides a framework in which to consider different variables relevant to distinct groups of students.

Similar to critiques that integration theory does not take into account the existence of multiple cultures that themselves influence and shape the dominant culture (Rendon, et al., 2000), segmented assimilation theorists argue for a “multicultural” perspective in which the cultures of different immigrant groups shift and shape the cultural norms of mainstream life (Zhou, 1999). Yet there is limited empirical research on how cultural change happens and is influenced by these multiple cultures, both in the collegiate and larger public context. More research is needed to understand factors that cause broader cultural change which may be more inclusive of minority student perspectives. The question also arises as to what the main culture actually is. Tanaka suggests that culture may be becoming a less useful construct, as several positionalities and cultural standpoints intersect. He points toward an “intercultural” framework which emphasizes the interrelationships of multiple cultures, rather than the existence of a dominant culture (2002, pp. 282-283). This framework acknowledges multiple identities and historically and socially constructed power relations related to those identities. It supposes that interactions with multiple agents and communities (such as classrooms, campus physical environment, family, home communities, and friends) are critical in influencing students' experiences.

Segmented assimilation theory as applied to integration theory provides an avenue toward envisioning a link between the tradition of integration research, with its more modernist view of a unitary subject and limited influences on subjects' experiences, and a more postmodern conception of a variety of influences, trajectories, and standpoints that students may experience as they participate in college life. Additionally, in the notion of the context of reception, it offers a more complex understanding of the social and structural factors influencing students' negotiation of the college environment. Selective acculturation may provide a way of understanding the capacity of the student to

have multiple affiliations and to construct his or her identity in relation to him/herself and members of other communities, including the college community.

Despite its promise in understanding the complexity of immigration processes, segmented assimilation theory is still an emergent theory with limitations. In fact, some of its original developers state their intention that the theory's models serve not as definitive "set[s] of hypotheses to be tested against the data but as ideal types guiding the empirical analysis and being, in turn, susceptible to refinement" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p.69). Hence, the theory is open to critique and suggestions for further development.

As discussed in this paper, scholars who use this theory imply that selective acculturation will lead to increased academic achievement. Yet in their analysis, Mexican American children, who seem to report positive indicators of selective acculturation, such as strong retention of the host country's language and a good relationship with their parents, show lower levels of school engagement and effort than members of selected Asian American groups, who are less likely to report knowing the home language and more likely to report struggles with parents. They suggest that "in this [latter] case, selective acculturation is manifested less in fluent bilingualism than in the intergenerational transmission of a strong achievement drive" (p. 215). Moreover, other research on Filipino and Haitian students (Espiritu & Wolf, 2001; Stepick, Stepick, Eugene, Teed, & Labiessiere, 2001), suggests that gender can mediate the effect of selective acculturation on educational achievement within ethnic groups. Collectively, these findings suggest that selective acculturation may mean very different things between and within different ethnic groups and have different effects on educational outcomes.

Additionally, while the context of reception variables included in segmented assimilation research to date address a range of macro and meso-level structural factors, the effect of school-level factors, such as school climates and teachers' and staffs' attitudes towards and support of students, so far has not been considered in great detail. Other research suggests that, at the school level, institutional climates that are not welcoming for students to seek help, K-12 teachers' and staff members' discouragement of students' efforts, and negative perceptions of their abilities negatively affect Mexican American students' educational achievement and attainment (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). This research into the effects of K-12 school culture on student achievement and college choice decisions can inform studies in the sociology of immigration that focus on the factors that account for variation in student achievement. Findings from this research also reinforce the importance of addressing the effects of school culture and climates at the postsecondary level in the study of retention.



The implications of these emerging tensions in segmented assimilation theory for the study of college student persistence are that culturally specific practices are relevant to understanding college student retention and that the role of selective acculturation may theoretically and practically mean different things for members of different ethnic groups. Such a perspective can counteract a tendency to employ a “cultural deficit” lens (Valencia, 1997) that might rank and privilege the cultural practices of higher achieving groups (such as Asian Americans in the aggregate) over those of other groups (such as Mexican Americans). Moreover, it could account for how these various cultural practices have different effects within ethnic groups in terms of other dimensions such as gender. Accordingly, as Tanaka (2002) suggests, the intersection of multiple dimensions of subjectivity, such as ethnicity, gender, and class, ought to be considered in understanding the retention of students of color.

### **Conclusion**

While critics have challenged the utility of integration theory, especially when considering minority students’ experiences, much research has been built on this tradition (Braxton, 2000a). Considering how segmented assimilation theory applies to integration theory can offer a way to bridge new theoretical and empirical insights into minority student persistence with the model of integration. In other words, using this theory as a lens to view integration introduces a way to envision how to include insights from research on the experiences of students of color to enhance the conceptualization of the integration theory itself.

This paper responds to the call to suggest new directions for understanding student persistence by bringing in literature from another field that suggests how integration theory might incorporate the perspectives of minority students. Specifically, it applies segmented assimilation theory’s concepts of the context of reception and selective acculturation to illuminate how minority students encounter and negotiate the college environment in ways that integration theory as currently conceptualized does not directly address. Making the analogy between segmented assimilation theory’s context of reception and factors in the college environment suggests that integration theory should address elements such as admissions policies, racist incidents and stereotypes, student body composition, institutional support for minority students, and access to participation in ethnic associations. Research cited in this paper suggests that these macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level elements related to the context of reception have an important influence on the quality of minority students’ participation in college. Applying a second key concept from segmented assimilation theory, selective acculturation, to the study of persistence suggests

that minority students may draw upon their cultural backgrounds in ways that enhance, rather than solely impede, their involvement in the college community. For example, minority students may adopt mainstream cultural norms in order to succeed in college. On the other hand, college students may retain aspects of their heritage and identity while still succeeding.

Through applying segmented assimilation theory to the study of higher education and drawing on higher education research literature, this paper raises a range of indicators and potential variables that researchers might use to study student perceptions of college climate or that administrators might address as they seek to create better contexts of reception for diverse students. These factors might be used to interpret students' perceptions of college climates as they make decisions about where to go to college, as well as to understand their encounters with different college climates and what elements influence persistence. Moreover, considering emerging critiques of segmented assimilation theory raises provocative questions for the study of minority student retention and suggests productive lines of further inquiry, especially with regard to the need to understand culturally and institutionally specific modes of college success. This framework only begins to reconceptualize the study of student persistence by suggesting the possibility of different paths toward successful participation in college life; future research can more specifically identify survey questions, variables, and factors that incorporate students' multiple affiliations and perspectives on their college experiences.

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