

Positive Youth Development and Undergraduate Student Retention

Abstract

The primary theoretical tradition in the study of college retention has been sociological. A review and synthesis of common themes of development among traditional-age, college students suggests that a developmental perspective on the retention of youth in college may have more to offer than the dominant sociological paradigm. This article argues that a key question in examining undergraduate retention should be are colleges and universities meeting the developmental needs of the youth enrolled in their institutions. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective is proposed as a more beneficial paradigm than current models used to examine college student retention. Opportunities and resources to support features of positive developmental settings in the college context are explored, as are potential limitations and directions for future research. The conclusion discusses the overall benefits of using a developmental and strengths-based perspective to study undergraduate retention.

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Introduction

The primary theoretical tradition in the study of college retention has been sociological. Sociologists Vincent Tinto and John Bean are the main theorists in this tradition. Tinto's (1975; 1993) and Bean's (1986) retention models are person-environment fit (PEF) models designed to predict student non-persistence. Person-environment fit models focus on the alignment of generally stable characteristics of the individual and characteristics of the environment (Caplan & Harrison, 1993). Both models attempt to explain the negative outcomes of dropout or attrition and, as such, can be classified as deficit oriented. The theorists have revised their models multiple times, building upon one another's ideas, since the 1980s. The models are still the dominant theoretical frameworks guiding research on undergraduate retention today. Both models assess whether student entry characteristics (e.g., high school GPA and rank) align with institutional characteristics (e.g., academic rigor and course offerings) then subsequently explain how misalignment between characteristics results in low academic and social integration. Neither model fully appreciates the changing nature of the student or of the environment over the course of the student's interaction with the institution.

The current state of research on retention of youth in college could be enhanced by adopting a developmental and positively oriented perspective. A developmental perspective would appreciate the dynamic, changing nature of traditional-age college students. A positively oriented perspective would attempt to explain the positive outcomes of successful transition, retention, and graduation. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective, which has emerged in the adolescent development literature (Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, Phelps, Gestsdottir, and von Eye, 2005; Larson, Eccles, and Gootman, 2004; Eccles and Gootman, 2002), may be an especially helpful vantage point from which to study the retention of youth in college. The PYD

perspective is grounded in ecological theories of development. In the PYD perspective, development is a life-long process that occurs through reciprocal and mutually beneficial interactions between the individual and the environment. Youth development is a gradually occurring component of human development. According to Hamilton and colleagues (2004), in the PYD perspective, “Human development is the natural unfolding of the potential inherent in the human organism in relation to the challenges and supports of the physical and social environment” (p.3).

As PYD occurs, young people increase their capacity to appreciate and act on their environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). As a result of the PYD process, young people thrive in their environment. Lerner (2011) defines thriving as “the growth of attributes that mark a flourishing, healthy young person” (p. 1109). These attributes are positive developmental outcomes including the “Five Cs” of PYD: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). I hypothesize that when students are thriving in college, retention will likely be a natural by-product of the student-environment interaction.

Increasing students’ ability to thrive on an individual level is likely to positively influence student persistence, retention rates, graduation rates, and student satisfaction (Schreiner, 2010). College communities can encourage PYD and student thriving by building and sustaining features of positive developmental settings such as those laid-out by Larson, Eccles, and Gootman (2004). Environments that include these features, discussed in detail later in this article, are likely to increase thriving, which can be measured through the growth of positive attributes. As thriving increases, individuals become more adept at understanding and acting on their environment (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman, 2004).

Currently, the main question guiding research on youth retention in college is framed from a person-environment fit perspective: Do students' entry characteristics align with institutional characteristics? This article suggests that, alternatively, the main questions guiding the study of retention in college should address youth development. For example: When youth thrive during their enrollment in college, according the definition of thriving in PYD, are they graduating? Will encouraging the features of positive developmental settings in the higher education context enhance transition and increase retention and graduation rates? I suggest that it is time to reconsider the potential of person-environment fit frameworks to guide research on college retention, and that the PYD perspective has much to offer.

This article will review sociological theories of retention as well as their limitations. A review and synthesis of common themes of development among traditional-age college students will be provided as will a description of the features of positive developmental settings. It will be argued that a key question in examining retention should be are colleges meeting the developmental needs of the youth enrolled in their institutions. Throughout this article, it will be proposed that the PYD perspective is a more beneficial paradigm than current models to examine college student retention. To this end, an overview of PYD will be provided. Opportunities and resources to support features of positive developmental settings in the college context will be explored, as will potential limitations and directions for future research. The conclusion will discuss the overall benefits of using a developmental and strengths-based perspective to appreciate undergraduate retention.

Sociological Models of Student Retention

The first empirical studies of undergraduate student retention occurred in the 1930s and investigated what was referred to at the time as student mortality: the failure of students to

graduate (Berger & Lyon, 2005). The study of higher education as a whole and undergraduate retention as a subfield began developing between the 1930s and 1950s, but it was not until the late 1960s that the study of undergraduate retention began to take shape (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Kohlberg's (1969) theory of moral development brought attention to the critical roles of community and socialization in student development of students. Perry's (1970) scheme of intellectual and ethical development outlined a series of transition points at which undergraduate students construct meaning of their academic experiences. Spady's (1970) sociological model of student dropout in higher education, based on Durkheim's suicide model, was the first widely recognized model in retention study. Spady proposed five variables (academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development and friendship support) contributed to social integration and could be indirectly linked to the decision to drop out of school through the intervening variables of satisfaction and commitment. In 1971, Spady published an empirical study that found formal academic performance was the dominant factor for student attrition (Spady, 1971).

Tinto's model of student dropout was introduced in 1975, shortly after Spady's model, and is still the most widely used model of student retention (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Tinto's model, like Spady's (1970), is based on Durkheim's suicide model. Durkheim's model purposed that individuals who do not integrate into a group are more likely to commit suicide. Tinto used this idea to suggest that students who do not academically and social integrate into an institution are likely to dropout. According to Tinto (1975; 1993), incongruence between student characteristics and institutional characteristics results in weak student commitments such as institutional commitment, commitment to degree obtainment, and commitment to career path. The independent, yet complementary, processes of academic integration and social integration

further influence commitment. Academic integration involves compliance with explicit academic norms of an institution, such as maintaining a required grade point average, as well as compliance with normative academic values, such as valuing the arts and humanities at a liberal arts school. Social integration is the degree to which a student finds the social environment of the institution compatible with his or her preferences. Social integration can be assessed by examination of peer-to-peer and faculty-to-student interactions. When a student fails to sufficiently integrate into the academic and social norms of an institution, the student's commitments are likely to weaken and the student is likely to dropout.

Bean (1986) built on Tinto's model of student departure. Like Tinto, Bean proposed that attrition results from the incongruence of background characteristics of admitted students with characteristics of the college environment. Bean added two key elements to Tinto's model. First, in addition to academic and social integration, Bean proposed the concept of organizational integration. Organizational integration includes the interactions and relationships a student has with college staff, advisors, and administrators. Furthermore, the ways in which a student interacts with the college bureaucratically or administratively is a part of organizational integration. Interactions may include meetings with the office of admissions or student aid, as well as opportunities for course selection, compliance to institutional rules and regulations, and engagement with academic and student services. Secondly, Bean added the concept of environmental pull to Tinto's model. Environmental pull is the way in which a student's background characteristics can directly influence attrition. Environmental pull may include financial hardship, a relationship with a significant other, work, an opportunity to transfer to another institution, and family responsibilities.

In 1993, Tinto revised his model to incorporate Bean's ideas of environmental pull and an appreciation of the ways in which factors outside of the direct college environment are likely to affect retention. Additionally, the 1993 model also offered another explanation for poor transition and failure to persist: inability to negotiate rites of passage. The model proposed that students fail to negotiate the rites of passage when they fail to integrate into and adopt the values of the college environment. According to Tinto (1993), students would be retained at higher rates if they were able to separate themselves from their family and high school friends and engage in processes leading them to appreciate and adopt the values of students and faculty in the college environment.

Limitations of Tinto's and Bean's Models

In later work, Bean (Bean & Eaton, 2000) reworked his model of retention to incorporate the psychological processes influencing retention decisions. Nonetheless, the model continues to rely on the characteristics of the individual and whether or not the characteristics fit with the college environment. As mentioned previously, Tinto's (1993) model is still the most widely utilized model in college student retention study and practice. While Tinto's model is popular, studies finding empirical support for the theory are modest. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) examined 40 studies utilizing Tinto's model. The authors found that only 19 of the studies demonstrated a link between academic integration and retention. It was found that social integration and academic integration are not equal predictors of retention; rather, social integration is a stronger predictor of retention than academic integration. Furthermore, Braxton and colleagues concluded that the model's definitions of academic and social integration are limited. Kuh and Love (2000) concurred with Braxton and colleagues and proposed that the separation between academic and social integration may be superficial as many activities on

campus are a complex combination of both academic and social activity. Guiffrida (2009) pointed out the model's failure to link academic and social integration to the developmental needs to youth.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Guiffrida (2006), have expressed great concern over the introduction of Tinto's rites of passage explanation. Hurtado and Carter questioned if students, especially those from historically underrepresented populations, must integrate into the campus culture and adopt the values of that culture to persist to graduation. Hurtado and Carter found Tinto's rites of passage explanation lacks rigorous empirical scrutiny and suggested that it is more beneficial to encourage a sense of belonging at an institution than to encourage adoption of institutional values especially if it means leaving behind familial connections and relationships. Guiffrida (2006) argued that Tinto's model should evolve to incorporate advances in cross-cultural psychological research since 1993. Without such an evolution, the model will remain culturally insensitive and inadequate to describe the persistence and academic achievement of minority students (Guiffrida, 2006).

Brunsdon, Davies, Shevlin and Bracken (2000), argued that building a retention model upon Durkheim's suicide model results in Tinto's model being globally flawed. Durkheim's suicide model itself lacks substantial scientific support and, even if Durkheim's model was proven to be a precise, accurate model of suicide, there remains serious uncertainty over the extent to which college dropout and suicide should be viewed as analogous behaviors. We strongly agree with Brunsdon and colleagues' evaluation that building a college completion model on a model of suicide makes the model fundamentally flawed. College retention models should be positively oriented and strive to explain the positive outcome of graduation. In a discussion of thriving in adolescence, Lerner and colleagues (2011) articulated the need to do a "better job of talking

about the positive attributes of our young people... what they should and can become, not only what they must not be” (p. 4). We believe a model based on appreciating the potential for positive youth development would be more generative than a model based on suicide theory. It would be productive and useful to adopt such a model to describe the developmental nature of successful college student retention. Such a model would appreciate barriers to success even while its fundamental intention would be to describe positive developmental outcomes.

Limitations of the Person-Environment Fit Paradigm

As previously indicated, person-environment fit models, such as Tinto (1993) and Bean’s (1986), predict that misalignment between the characteristics of an individual and characteristics of an environment will result in negative outcomes for both the person and the environment (Caplan & Harrison, 1993). Concerns with person-environment fit models arise regarding the stability of characteristics on which matches are made (Caplan & Harrison, 1993). While some characteristics of person and environment are stable, other characteristics are changeable. This is especially true for young people in college who are continuously developing and changing. While human development theories have been broadly applied to appreciating the K-12 educational experience, they have not been extensively applied to understanding youth transition to and retention in college nor have they been applied to the development of programs and supports within higher education to guide youth through these processes (Guiffrida, 2009).

Human development among traditional-age college students. A comparative review of Arnett’s (2006; 2000), Erikson’s (1980; 1986), Levinson’s (1996; 1977) and Vaillant’s (2002; 1977) views of adult psychosocial development (see Table 1) during the late teens to early twenties reveals several commonalities. All four theories characterize the late teens to early twenties as:

- not full adulthood;
- a period in which a great amount of time and resources are spent on identity construction;
- a time during which individuals experience commitment uncertainty (they explore and evaluate existing and future commitments);
- a time during which individuals explore possibilities for various life courses;
- a time during which the potential for growth and maturation are significant yet individuals are still vulnerable to adult world;
- a time during which intimacy and relationships play a critical role in development/maturation;
- a period of personal challenge and internal conflict;
- a time during which individuals develop relationships which influence future life course.

These themes of development are likely to be experienced by most youth transitioning to and persisting in college. As such, developmental perspectives should be taken into account when studying this student group. The person-environment fit paradigm is a limited framework from which to study these students because it is not embedded in a developmental perspective.

Overview of Positive Youth Development (PYD)

PYD has been applied to the scientific study of adolescence as well as to a range of principles and practices in youth programs, initiatives, and activities (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Phelps, Zimmerman, Warren, Jelicic, von Eye, & Lerner, 2009). PYD is both a developmental perspective and an approach to providing youth with opportunities and resources to develop a sense of belonging, competence, usefulness, and, ultimately, empowerment. Lerner

and colleagues (2005) ground the PYD perspective in the notion that “every young person has the potential for successful, healthy development and that all youth possess the capacity for positive development” (p. 20). The PYD perspective encourages the scientific study of youth development from the perspective that youth development is not merely about avoiding risk but that youth are assets to be developed; youth development is not a problem to be managed (Hamilton et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). The perspective replaces the traditional deficit view of adolescents focusing on disease and prevention. The traditional deficit view envisions youth as broken or likely to be broken and require fixing or preventative measures (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD does not offer a remedy or prescription for fixing problematic adolescent behaviors; rather, its goal is to provide all youth with resources, opportunities, and support systems to empower themselves. Individual programs can actively promote PYD; however, PYD is most beneficial when entire communities work collaboratively to create a continuum of services and opportunities to support youth to grow into healthy adults. PYD strategies focus on providing youth with opportunities to form relationships with caring adults and peers, to build skills, serve their communities, and exercise leadership.

The PYD perspective is built upon several fundamental principles (Hamilton et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). The primary principle is that youth are perceived as respected, valuable assets to society. Opportunities and supports for youth should appreciate their evolving developmental needs. Youth should not be viewed as recipients of opportunities and supports; rather, they should be viewed as active participants helping to shape their own development. In the PYD perspective, schools, families, and communities share the responsibility for healthy youth development. Environments should offer opportunities for youth to serve their communities and enhance their competence, connections, character, and confidence. Youth

should be encouraged to try new activities and experiment within a safe environment. Role models and caring relationships with adults should promote the development of positive social norms and values. Finally, youth should be engaged in pro-social activities promoting a sense of self-worth and a sense of belonging.

What is Development in the PYD Perspective?

In the PYD perspective, development is a life-long process. Youth development is a gradually occurring component of human development. Development occurs in relation to an individual's environment and is the natural realization of human potential. Positive development occurs through reciprocal and mutually influential relations between an individual and the multiple organizational levels of an environment. When interactions between the individual and the context are mutually beneficial, positive development occurs. Engaging in regular activities that become progressively more complex over time promotes development. Youth demonstrate agency in the development process and are considered active participants in shaping their development (Hamilton et al., 2004). Youth are actively involved in self-development and the environment. The PYD perspective is premised on the notion that context plays a critical role in development and that youth and their environments are constantly changing.

Theoretical Foundations

The PYD perspective is grounded in ecological theories of development. Ecological development contends that changes occur across the life span through dynamic relations between the individual and the multiple ecological levels of their environment including family, peer group, school, community, and culture systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; 1998). These ecological levels all change di-directionally and interdependently across time. Bronfenbrenner (1998) emphasizes that development occurs through engagement in challenging activities and

supportive relationships that endure over time and increase in complexity as the individual becomes more competent. Proximal processes are key mechanisms of development. These processes are regularly occurring activities, involving relationships with others, that become progressively more complex over a period of time. Interaction between youth and their environment is reciprocal. Development occurs through progressive, mutual accommodation between the active and complex individual and the changing setting in which the individual lives. Relations between settings and the larger contexts in which settings are embedded influence development. Development does not happen to a person; rather, the individual is actively involved in the developmental process.

The PYD perspective also draws upon the literature on prevention and resiliency (Hamilton et al., 2004). Prevention research and practice have explored opportunities to support youth before risk behaviors, such as alcohol use or violence, occur. Prevention strives to address circumstances of youth including schools, families, peer groups, and communities. The PYD perspective builds on prevention research by promoting not just prevention of risk-behaviors but thriving. Instead of addressing circumstances, PYD perspective encourages identifying environmental and individual assets. PYD is concerned not just with environmental assets but also learning how to appreciate and act on the environment. Resilience research attempts to identify the ecological conditions and individual assets that protect youth from being adversely affected by a particular negative experience (Hamilton et al., 2006). Resiliency research has found that having relationships with caring adults, good decision-making skills, and other individual assets can help youth who may be considered at-risk avoid negative outcomes. The PYD perspective extends this research; it is interested in the ecological and individual assets of

all individuals not just in those who bounce back from an adverse experience or circumvent negative outcomes.

Positive Development During Late Adolescence

The PYD perspective concerns the identification of healthy and beneficial behaviors and outcomes among youth. Prior to the emergence of the PYD perspective, the adolescent development literature frequently defined healthy behaviors in adolescence as the avoidance of negative behaviors (e.g., dropping out of school, using drugs, etc.) (Lerner et al., 2005). The PYD perspective seeks to identify and define healthy behaviors such as caring about others, having positive self-regard, and developing mutual bonds among youth, peers, school, family, and community. During late adolescence, youth engage in varied activities that are likely to influence the rest of one's life. Positive development during late adolescence is important for setting a foundation for continued optimal development throughout the duration of the life span (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006).

Youth begin the passage to adulthood during late adolescence, which typically begins around the age of eighteen. Relationships are the primary supports for helping youth navigate the transition from late adolescence into adulthood. During late adolescence there are critical assets and needs requisite for "keeping youth on healthy, productive pathways into adulthood" (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006, p.14). These assets include individual as well as environmental assets (see Table 2). These assets help youth negotiate challenges during the transition to adulthood as well as develop the skills, values, attitudes, and social capital requisite for an optimal transition to adulthood (Lerner et al., 2005; Zarret and Eccles, 2006). PYD in late adolescence promotes a healthy, productive, and satisfying life for youth and sets a foundation for adulthood (Hamilton and Pittman, 2004).

How Does Development Occur in the PYD Perspective?

Plasticity. Plasticity is the potential for individual systematic change in the course of development (Lerner, 2004). The PYD perspective considers the plasticity of developmental systems an inherent strength of all humans. As individuals accommodate new information and experiences through mutually influential relations between the self and the environment, there exists potential for systematic change. In the PYD perspective, the concept of plasticity has been used to propose that developmental systems can be directed to the advancement of desired outcomes as well as to preventing undesirable behaviors (Lerner et al., 2005). Plasticity is not limitless. The magnitude of plasticity varies by individual and by context. Time and history as well as individual heredity and the environment influence plasticity. Individuals leverage inherited predispositions and shape their development through behavioral choices and their interpretations of experiences (Hamilton & Pittman, 2004).

Adaptive developmental regulation. The key mechanisms of development in ecological systems theory are proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1998). Proximal processes are a joint function of the characteristics of the individual and of the environment. To develop intellectually, emotionally and socially, an individual must interact with persons, objects, and symbols in their environment in a progressively more complex manner. Interactions must be reciprocal and occur on a regular basis over the course of time. In the PYD perspective, engaging in mutually beneficial proximal processes is referred to as adaptive developmental regulation. Adaptive developmental regulation is the mutually beneficial way in which people act upon their environment and the environment acts upon them (Lerner, 2004). Adaptive developmental regulation capitalizes on plasticity (Lerner et al., 2005). It makes the most of the potential for

change in the developmental system. Adaptive developmental regulation directs the developmental system to the advancement of positive outcomes.

The means through which an individual contributes to adaptive developmental regulation is called self-regulation (Gestsdottir and Lerner, 2008; Lerner, 2004). There are two components of self-regulation: organismic and intentional (Gestsdottir and Lerner, 2008). Organismic regulation involves individual biological and physiological attributes that contribute to the relationship an individual has with the environment. These attributes are broad and consistent (e.g., pubertal timing, temperamental attributes). Intentional self-regulation is characterized by goal-directed behaviors. These are behaviors of active selection by which a person aims to manipulate situations to meet desires. Intentional self-regulation involves the processes of selection, optimization, and compensation (Baltes, Lindenberger, and Staudinger, 2006). During the process of selection, the individual identifies goals. Optimization is when the individual finds resources to attain goals. Compensation is when the individual modifies his or her behaviors in response to obstacles on the path to goal attainment.

Developmental assets. The values, skills, experiences, and opportunities that young people develop to reach their full potential are called developmental assets (Lerner et al., 2005; Zarrett and Eccles, 2006). Developmental assets encourage youth to grow into healthy, productive adults who are capable of making thoughtful decisions, taking personal responsibility, and having a positive influence on their environment and in the lives of others. Developmental assets are important for all young people regardless of ethnicity, gender, and economic status. Assets have cumulative power. The more assets an individual experiences, the more likely it is that he or she will engage in healthy behaviors. The fewer assets youth experience, the more likely it is that they will make harmful or unhealthy choices and engage in high-risk behaviors

such as alcohol use or violence. Historically, youth development models have identified individual and environmental deficits or problems. The PYD perspective identifies assets that are considered individual and environmental strengths (Lerner et al., 2005). The PYD perspective contends that all youth have positive individual assets or strengths and all families, schools, and communities have assets or strengths which can serve as the building blocks of healthy, positive development (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). Developmental assets can provide youth with a sense of security and aid individuals in making healthy life choices. Individual assets facilitating PYD include, but are not limited to, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (see Table 2) (Larson, Eccles, and Gootman, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). Environmental assets facilitating PYD include, but are not limited to, support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (see Table 3) (Larson, Eccles, and Gootman, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005).

Developmental Outcomes

As PYD occurs, young people increase their capacity to appreciate and act on their environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). As a result of the PYD process, young people thrive in their environment. Lerner (2011) defines thriving as “the growth of attributes that mark a flourishing, healthy young person” (p. 1109). These attributes are positive developmental outcomes including the five Cs of PYD: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The five Cs model. Eccles and Gootman (2002) introduced the five Cs model of developmental outcomes from PYD. The five Cs are based on reviews of adolescent development literature and the experiences of practitioners. Competence is a positive domain-specific view of one’s self in areas such as social settings, academic setting, or vocations.

Confidence involves global sense of regard or self-worth. Connections are the positive, mutual bonds among youth, peers, school, family, and community. The outcome of character involves an individual sense of right and wrong, integrity, and respect for community and cultural standards. Caring is an outcome defined by capacity for empathy and sympathetic sensibilities. Thriving is defined as, and can be measured by, growth in these outcomes (Lerner et al., 2005). Growth in these outcomes over time results in youth being “more likely to be on a life trajectory marked by mutually beneficial person ↔ context relations that contribute to self, family, community, and civil society... and less likely to be on a trajectory of risk and problem behavior” (Bowers et al., 2010, p.5). This contribution has been theorized to be the sixth C. Contribution occurs when youth are exhibiting behavior of active and engaged citizenship.

The College Context and PYD

Thus far, this article has argued that there are limitations inherent in Tinto’s and Bean’s PEF models of youth retention in college. These limitations are due to the models’ lack of a developmental focus. Youth transitioning to college are likely to experience common themes of development and as such it is advantageous to use a developmental perspective to appreciate their experience. Contemporary perspectives of human development are grounded in developmental systems theories that view individuals as embedded in an environmental system with multiple layers of organization. This environmental system includes environmental assets that influence development. Furthermore, youth possess individual assets that influence development. Development results from dynamic relations among these variables in the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1998; Lerner, 1998).

The use of a contemporary perspective of human development, including PYD, to study college student retention would require investigators to consider the potential of the college

context to meet the developmental needs of students. An assumption of PYD is that young people thrive when the context supports their development (Lerner et al., 2005). The research tradition in the study of undergraduate retention has been student-centered focusing on characteristics and behaviors of students who drop out (Chen, 2012). This tradition could be enhanced by appreciating the environmental settings that support successful students. Such research requires identifying both individual and environmental assets as well as the ways in which institutions can contribute to the conditions in which students are successful. Such research would study the features of positive developmental settings in college as well as the ways in which individuals interact with these features. Interaction between individuals and assets within the college environment, contribute to academic achievement, positive mental health, and persistence in college (Hartley, 2011). Individual perceptions of the college environment and of the institutional climate also influence undergraduate retention (Oseguera and Rice, 2009). Studying the college context including individual and environmental assets, the ways in which individuals and the environment interact, and perceptions of the environment will promote an appreciation of human development among students transitioning to and persisting in college.

Both on-campus and off-campus resources, programs, and supports influence a student's persistence in college (Smith and Zhang, 2009). To develop resources, programs, and supports in the PYD framework the features of positive developmental settings should be considered. Table 4 provides examples how the PYD framework could function in the college context. This table demonstrates that there are many opportunities and resources to support features of PYD in the college context. Environmental assets are provided as well as examples of opportunities to promote the assets within the college context. The table also identifies campus resources existent

on most campuses that can be used to support these environmental assets. Finally, the table identifies potential developmental outcomes from the students' interaction with these assets.

By developing features of positive developmental settings in the college context, colleges and universities could promote PYD among youth transitioning to and persisting in college. Applying the PYD perspective to college, the collegiate environment should be committed to building young people's strengths and abilities. Colleges and universities can foster a context rich in environmental assets by:

- encouraging youth to develop supportive relationships with faculty, staff and students;
- empowering youth by providing opportunities to take on useful roles in the college community;
- empowering youth by engaging them in activities to develop and clarify their personal, academic, and career goals;
- communicating clear boundaries and expectations for positive, healthy behavior in the college environment;
- providing youth with meaningful and creative opportunities to belong and make a contribution to the college community;
- providing opportunities for building and reinforcing skills both inside and out of class;
- and, actively involving families and the broader community in the collegiate experience.

Limitations

It is important to note the potential limitations of applying the PYD perspective to appreciating youth retention in college. There are at least four such limitations. First, the relative newness of the PYD perspective is a potential limitation. Despite theoretical support for the benefits of PYD strong empirical evidence is just beginning to emerge. Furthermore, the

perspective has not been applied to the college context. There is currently no published empirical study of the PYD perspective in the college context. While the perspective appears to be applicable to appreciating the experiences of traditional-age college students, it may not address the needs of older students enrolled in college. Second, the PYD perspective is positively oriented and focused on identifying individual and environmental strengths. The perspective is decidedly not deficit oriented. This appears to be a helpful approach; however, if the perspective completely fails to appreciate the risks youth face it can be a significant limitation. Lack of attention to the risks youth face can potentially jeopardize healthy development (Eccles et al., 1993). A third limitation stems from the nature of college programs and support for youth transition and retention. Many programs and supports target individual students or student groups that are considered at-risk. Applying a PYD perspective would require that programs and supports address the cultural environment and social context in which students live and learn. This would be a potentially challenging shift. Programs and supports would need to address the key environments contributing to individual development and would need to involve immediate learning environments as well as broader systems of families and communities. A fourth limitation of the perspective could stem from the great differences among college settings. Just as community settings and family settings differ, college settings differ. The PYD perspective proposes that while all settings differ, all have ecological assets promoting PYD. Nonetheless, critical differences across colleges and universities could result in challenges for empirical study and the identification of best practices.

Key Directions for Future Research

Future research is necessary to begin working through the potential limitations of the PYD perspective as well as to get a better sense of the feasibility of application within the

college context. . Five directions for future research are provided here. First, a comprehensive framework or model for applying the PYD perspective to youth retention in college is needed to guide future inquiry and practice. This framework would envision student success in college as more than just the avoidance of problems or undesirable behaviors (e.g. college dropout). Instead, this model would appreciate the themes of development among traditional-age college students as well as the processes through which individuals increase their capacity to appreciate and act on their environment. Increasing one's ability to appreciate and act on their environment in the college context should result in successful college outcomes including transition, retention, and graduation. Figure 1 is an initial attempt at the development of this framework; however, a more thorough review and proposal of such a framework is necessary. Second, applying the PYD perspective may require changing some broader assumptions about what takes place in college. PYD would insist on attention to more than getting students in and through to graduation. It would require an overall examination of developmental trajectories for youth in college. Most colleges and universities assess risks during college entry. Programs and supports are subsequently developed based on the assessed risk. The PYD perspective would necessitate the assessment of assets to be developed as opposed to risks or problems to be ameliorated through remediation or interventions. Research is needed to explore how to assess assets at college admissions as well as how to assess potential for growth during college. A third direction for future research concerns the concept of thriving, the five Cs model, and positive college outcomes. The goal of PYD is thriving. Thriving results from growth of developmental outcomes outlined in the five Cs model. Assessment instruments are necessary to determine how to measure growth of these outcomes. Furthermore, it will be beneficial to determine the tipping point for thriving. Must a student experience growth in all five Cs to thrive? What is the tipping

point for thriving? Is there a mechanism that triggers thriving? Future research should address these questions as well as develop standardized measures for the five Cs and the potential sixth C of contribution. The fourth area of future research concerns positive development in the college context. This research would explore the features of positive developmental settings specifically in college. It would address how to use the PYD perspective to develop college transition and retention programs. It would also address how to use the PYD perspective for interventions for students who show signs of academic distress. A fifth area of research would examine if individual and environmental assets are culturally specific. As higher education becomes an increasingly global endeavor, as more students choose to study abroad, and more American institutions open satellite campuses abroad, this is an important line of inquiry. This research may explore if individual and environmental assets requisite for positive college outcomes varies by culture.

Conclusion

The current state of research on retention of youth in college could be enhanced by adopting a developmental and positively oriented perspective. Person-environment models have been the dominant paradigm for the study of college student retention. These models, including Tinto's (1993) and Bean's (1986), do not appreciate youth development. This article has proposed that an alternative to these person-environment fit models is the PYD perspective. This perspective would appreciate the dynamic, changing nature of traditional-age college students and could be used to examine the positive college outcomes of successful transition, retention and graduation. A review and synthesis of common themes of development among traditional-age college students and a description of the features of positive developmental settings, has revealed that a developmentally oriented perspective is an appropriate lens for the study of youth retention in

college. Looking ahead to future research, a key question in the study of retention should be are colleges meeting the developmental needs of the youth enrolled in their institutions.

Retaining a student is fundamental to the ability of an institution to carry out its educational mission. For years the study of undergraduate retention has relied on the person-environment fit models. These models assess characteristics of the person and characteristics of the institution then determine if there is incongruence between the person and environment. If there is incongruence, low academic and social integration is anticipated. Programs and supports are then developed in reaction to these low levels. Instead of reactive activities, a proactive approach may be more beneficial. Instead of endeavoring to identify students most likely to dropout then attempting to prevent and fix behavior problems, retention research and practice should consider the college context and ask what opportunities, learning experiences, and supports youth need in college so that they feel connected, prepared, and engaged. The PYD perspective is a lens through which to ask this question. It is grounded in a commitment to encouraging all young people to thrive (Lerner, 2011). Youth enrolled in colleges and universities should be viewed as assets who can make helpful contributions to our communities and serve as future leaders.

In recent years, as changes in the economic environment have resulted in a tightening of resources within higher education, higher education professionals have seen stringent budget cuts to programs focusing on discrete youth populations or groups labeled at-risk. Administrators have asked higher education professionals and educators to develop programs that can help all youth. PYD offers an opportunity to do this. The current model of retention study and practice relies on educators to develop targeted programs for at-risk youth who do not “fit” with the environment. Alternatively, the PYD perspective requires that the responsibility for positive outcomes shifts to the entire educational community. With a PYD approach, the entire

community would become engaged in promoting the positive college outcomes of transition, retention, and graduation for all students.

Historically higher education research has addressed pathology with a focus on ameliorating students' problems (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). To this end, much research exists on why students fail to persist as opposed to why they succeed. It is recommended here that the study of and approaches to the retention of youth in college should take a strength-based approach. Retention work of this kind would involve appreciating not just the least successful students but also flourishing students who are fulfilled, accomplished, and learning.

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Figure 1. Toward a lens of PYD to appreciate youth transition to and retention in college.

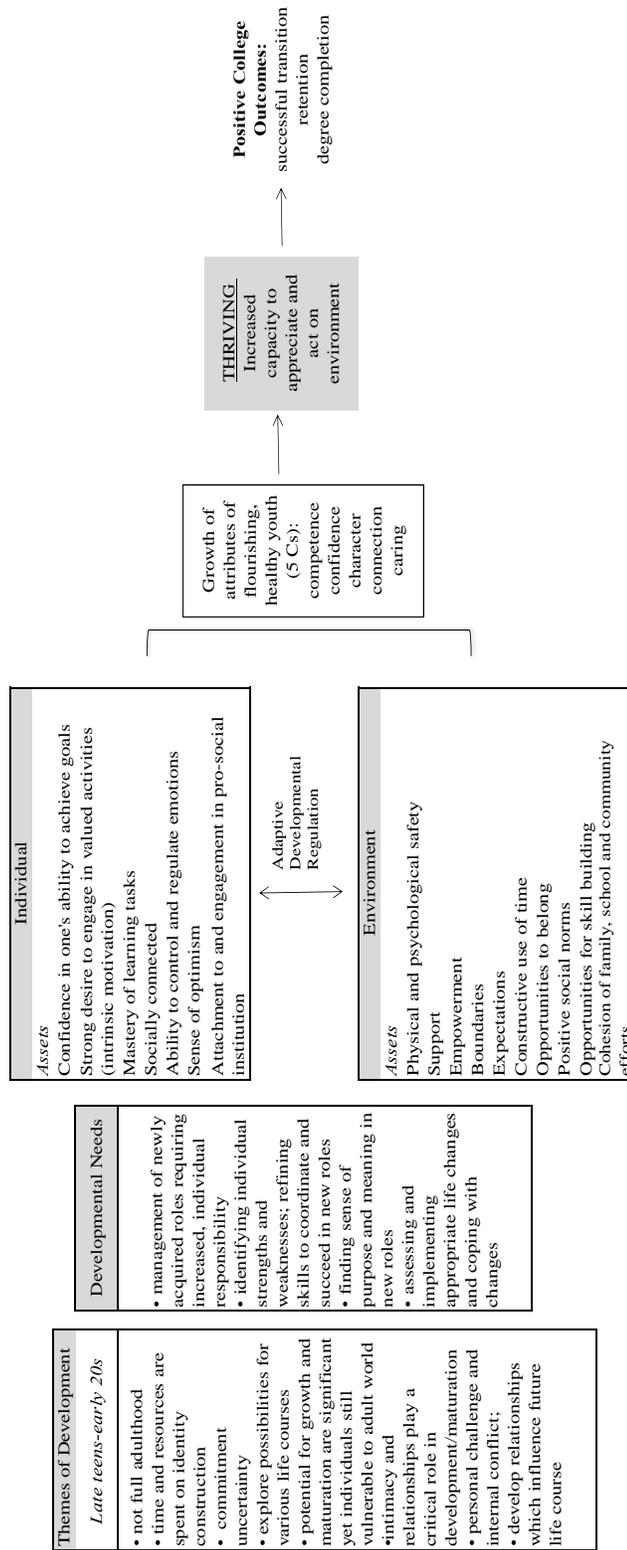


Table 1

Features of Development Among 18 to 24-Year-Olds

Erikson (1968; 1980)	Levinson (1978; 1996)	Vaillant (1977; 2002)	Arnett (2000; 2006)
Identity development	Beginning of adult identity development	Maturation and individual development is a continuous lifelong process	Identity exploration
Exploration of partners	Effortful and prolonged transition from childhood to adulthood	Self and environment are dynamic	Instability
Internal conflict between intimacy and isolation	Significant self-adjustments and adaptations	Preoccupied with the tensions of intimacy	Self-focus
Considering commitment to a partner	Demonstration of some adult choice and sense of self-agency, but individual still immature and vulnerable in adult world	Learning to alter the self and the environment in order to mature	Feeling in-between
The possibility of intimacy occurs upon the establishment of a secure sense of identity	Exploration of adult world possibilities; individual likely to form relationship with a mentor or more experienced individual	Relationships with others develop which have the possibility to shape the life course	Feeling a heightened sense of possibilities

Table 1

Table 2

Development During Late Adolescence Based on Lerner et al., 2005; Zarrett and Eccles, 2006

Needs	Individual Assets	Environmental Assets
Management of newly acquired roles requiring increased, individual responsibility	Having confidence in one's ability to achieve goals and make a difference in the world	Available social supports/relationships (family, peers, romantic partners, role models, instructors, mentors)
Identifying individual strengths and weaknesses; refining skills to coordinate and succeed in new roles	Strong desire to engage in valued activities (intrinsic motivation)	Developmental settings in which youth can interact with and explore needs (school, work, community organizations, faith-based organizations)
Finding sense of purpose and meaning in new roles	Commitment to learning and mastery of learning tasks	Developmental settings in which individuals can develop and explore autonomy while still having support
Assessing and implementing appropriate life changes and coping with changes	Social competences and social connectedness	Environment offering opportunities to identify individual strengths and weaknesses as well as ways to refine skills to meet the demands of the new roles youth are taking on
	Ability to control and regulate emotions	Opportunities for youth to explore sense of meaning and purpose in new roles
	Sense of optimism; Positive values; Positive identity	Opportunities for youth to assess and make appropriate life changes and learn how to cope with such changes
	Attachment to and engagement in at least one pro-social institution (school, faith-based organization, family, community)	Opportunities for youth to learn how to manage new, demanding roles

Table 2

Table 3

*Features of Daily Settings and Experiences that Promote PYD Among Adolescents
Based on Larson, Eccles, and Gootman, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005; Zarrett and Eccles, 2006*

Environmental Asset(s)	Characteristics
Physical and psychological safety	Settings are free from violence and harassment; Conditions are conducive to healthy physical development
Support	Caring community; Youth have quality relationships with adults (parents and nonparents); Youth are emotionally supported as well as provided instrumental support; Support for efficacy and mattering conveying to youth that they are making a useful contribution to the environment
Empowerment	Youth are given useful roles in the community and are seen as resources in the community
Boundaries	Families, schools, and community provide clear rules and boundaries creating a sense of order and stability without too much adult control; Boundaries are culturally and developmentally appropriate
Expectations	Adults, schools, and community members have high expectations of youth; Youth have the opportunity to have input in expectations, rules, and guidelines
Constructive use of time	Youth are provided with creative opportunities; Limited unstructured time with peers; Opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to community
Opportunities to belong	Activities to develop a sense of belonging are offered; All youth have opportunities for participation and to feel valued; Youth provide a service to others
Positive social norms	Youth perceive peers and community members have positive habits, norms, and expectancies; Youth perceive positive school and organization cultures
Opportunities for skill building	Opportunities for meaningful challenge developing cognitive, physical, psychological, cultural, and social skills; Skills are taught and reinforced
Cohesion of family, school and community efforts	Family involvement in education; Information flows among families, schools, and communities; Family, school, and community activities reinforce one another

Table 3

Table 4

Opportunities and Resources to Support Environmental Assets in the College Context and Potential Developmental Outcomes From Eccles and Gootman (2002) 5 Cs model

Environmental Asset(s)	Opportunities	Resources	Potential Developmental Outcome(s)
Physical and psychological safety	Classrooms, learning spaces, and living environments are free from violence and harassment and are conducive to healthy physical development	Campus health, wellness, and counseling services; Residential staff and programming; Student governance; Dean of students programming and services; Social justice pedagogies; Diversity education	Confidence; Connection
Support	Students have quality relationships with parents and members of college community; Students are emotionally supported as well as provided instrumental support; Students engage in activities making a useful contribution to the environment	Mentoring programs; Academic support services; Service opportunities; Parent engagement in college activities; Faculty communicate commitment to and concern for students; Students engage in group learning and research	Connection; Competence
Empowerment	Students have useful roles in the college community and are seen as resources	Student participation in faculty research; Students trained to mentor, become Orientation leaders, Residential Advisors, tutors, etc.; Work study opportunities; Students participate in committee work and have voice in institutional decision-making	Competence; Confidence; Connection
Boundaries	Clear rules and boundaries are communicated to all community members creating a sense of order and stability; Boundaries are culturally and developmentally appropriate	Students, faculty, and community members abide by an honor code; Academic eligibility standards are clearly communicated; Academic advising services; Dean of Students programs and services; Campus Safety programs and services; Relationships among college, students, and town, city, and local governance	Character; Connection

Expectations	Community members have high expectations of students; Students have the opportunity to have input in expectations, rules, and guidelines	Academic challenge and rigor; Honor code; Student government; Merit-based scholarships, fellowships, and awards	Connection; Character
Constructive use of time	Students are provided with creative opportunities; Limited unstructured time with peers; Opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to community	Liberal arts studies/general education curriculum; Co-curricular activities; Service learning; Experiential education; Research opportunities; Internships; Study abroad	Character; Caring
Opportunities to belong	Activities to develop a sense of belonging are offered; All students have opportunities for participation and to feel valued; Students provide a service to others	Orientation; Service learning; Student organizations; Cultural organizations	Connection; Caring
Positive social norms	Youth perceive peers and community members have positive habits, norms, and expectancies; Youth perceive positive school and organization cultures	Mentoring opportunities; Leadership development; Partnerships among students, faculty, and staff	Connection
Opportunities for skill building	Students participate in meaningful challenges developing cognitive, physical, psychological, cultural, and social skills; Skills are taught and reinforced	General education requirements; Academic support services; Health, wellness, and counseling services; Diversity programming; Career development services	Competence
Cohesion of family, school and community efforts	Families are involved in education; Information flows among families, college, and communities; Family, college, and community activities reinforce one another	Family and alumni organizations; Orientation programs; Partnerships local government and community organizations	Connection

Table 4