

The Relational Gap: Community College Students' Perceptions of Faculty Relationship-Building as a Driver for Retention

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[Abstract] Community colleges across the United States continue to face declining student retention rates, a problem with far-reaching implications for student success and institutional sustainability. This qualitative exploratory case study investigated students' perceptions and beliefs about how building relationships with faculty influences their desire to persist at a community college in rural Indiana. Grounded in Tinto's Integration Framework (1997) and Pascarella and Terenzini's Impact Theory (2005), this study employed purposeful sampling to recruit 15 participants who had completed at least one semester of coursework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant questionnaires conducted via Zoom during Spring 2022. Thematic analysis using NVivo software identified four overarching themes: (a) positive faculty characteristics influence retention, (b) faculty communication influences retention, (c) barriers to faculty-student relationships, and (d) other institutional influences on retention. Findings indicate that students place significant value on faculty who are welcoming, accessible, and proactive in their communication.

Conversely, student mental health challenges, low self-esteem, and faculty behaviors perceived as dismissive were identified as significant barriers to persistence. Implications for community college leaders include the integration of faculty professional development focused on relationship-building, emotional intelligence, and advocacy-oriented pedagogy. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature regarding student-faculty relational dynamics at rural community colleges.

[Keywords] community college retention, student-faculty relationships, qualitative case study, Tinto's Integration Framework, persistence, rural higher education

1. Introduction

Retention remains one of the most urgent challenges facing community colleges in the United States. National data show troubling declines in community college persistence and enrollment, with open-access institutions experiencing some of the steepest losses in recent years. These trends matter because community colleges serve students whose educational pathways are often shaped by work obligations, family responsibilities, financial precarity, and uneven prior preparation. In such contexts, persistence is rarely a purely academic decision; it is also a relational and environmental one. Based on the author's qualitative exploratory case study in this article, she argues that faculty relationship-building is one of the most immediate ways students experience whether they belong in college.

For many community college students, especially those in commuter, part-time, and non-traditional settings, the classroom may be the most consistent site of institutional contact. As a result, the faculty member often becomes the key interpreter of the college itself: welcoming or discouraging, accessible or distant, affirming or alienating. In this sense, student-faculty relationships are not peripheral to retention. They are central to whether students experience the academic and social integration that persistence theories identify as essential.

Tinto's Student Integration Framework provided the primary conceptual lens for this study. Tinto (1975, 1997, 2017) proposed that students are more likely to persist when they become integrated into the academic and social life of the institution. While the model has been highly influential, critics have noted that it emerged largely from four-year, residential contexts and may not fully capture the realities of commuter and community college environments. That limitation makes community colleges especially important sites for examining how integration actually operates in practice. In such settings, integration may be less about residence halls and campus traditions and more about whether students feel known, respected, challenged, and supported in the classroom.

The original case study examined how students perceived the role of faculty relationship-building in their decision to remain enrolled. In doing so, it extended the existing literature in three ways. First, it centers student voices in a context often underrepresented in persistence research. Second, it applies models from sociology to a community college setting in which social and academic integration are deeply shaped by faculty interactions. Third, it offers implications for professional development by identifying faculty behaviors that students interpret as persistence-supporting practices.

2. Student Integration and Social Solidarity: Two Conceptual Models

2.1 Tinto's Student Integration

Tinto's framework remains one of the most widely used models for understanding student departure. Tinto's Student Integration Framework provides the primary conceptual lens for this study. Tinto (1975, 1997, 2017) proposed that students are more likely to persist when they become integrated into the academic and social life of the institution. While the model has been highly influential, critics have noted that it emerged largely from four-year, residential contexts and may not fully capture the realities of commuter and community college environments. That limitation makes community colleges especially important sites for examining how integration actually operates in practice. In such settings, integration may be less about residence halls and campus traditions and more about whether students feel known, respected, challenged, and supported in the classroom.

Its core claim is that persistence depends on students' integration into the institution's academic and social systems. Academic integration is reflected in students' engagement with learning, performance, and intellectual development. Social integration involves belonging, connection, and affirmation within the college environment. Later refinements to the model emphasized the classroom as a primary site where both forms of integration are produced.

This emphasis is especially relevant for community colleges. Unlike students in residential institutions, community college students often spend limited time on campus and may have few opportunities for informal peer engagement outside class. For them, faculty relationships may serve as a principal mechanism through which institutional membership is experienced. In this way, the classroom becomes not only an academic space but also a cultural and relational one, where students decide whether college is a place in which they can succeed.

Prior scholarship supports this view. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that informal interactions with faculty are associated with positive learning and persistence outcomes. Meyers (2009) reported that students care deeply whether faculty appear to care about them, even when some faculty underestimate the importance of relational work. Jorgenson et al. (2018) linked faculty connectedness to lower withdrawal consideration, while Cuseo (2018) described faculty-student engagement as one of the highest-leverage tools available for student success. Studies have also shown that students value approachability, responsiveness, encouragement, and meaningful feedback (Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019; Ingraham et al., 2018).

At the same time, scholars have questioned whether Tinto's model fully accounts for the lives of nontraditional and community college students. Students balancing employment, caregiving, poverty, and mental health stressors may experience integration differently than traditional-age residential students. Their persistence decisions are shaped not only by campus involvement but by whether institutional actors recognize the realities of their lives. This critique does not invalidate Tinto's framework; rather, it invites adaptation. In community colleges, integration may be best understood not as assimilation into a traditional campus culture, but as participation in a learning environment where students experience academic legitimacy, relational safety, and practical support. This study uses Tinto's framework in that adapted sense. It asks how students interpret faculty relationship-building as a driver of integration and persistence and how relational gaps may disrupt that process.

2.2 Durkheim's Sociological Foundation

To fully appreciate the theoretical weight of Tinto's framework, it is important to trace its sociological roots to Émile Durkheim's landmark 1897 work, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Durkheim argued that suicide was not merely a private act but a social one, shaped by the degree to which individuals were integrated into and regulated by their communities. He identified *egoistic suicide* as the form of self-destruction most likely to occur when individuals lack meaningful social ties, when they feel disconnected from the group and therefore expendable within it. Conversely, strong social integration, the sense of belonging to something larger than oneself, functioned as a protective force, anchoring individuals to life and to shared purpose. Durkheim also identified *anomie* as a condition of normlessness in which individuals lack clear expectations or moral guidance, leaving them disoriented and unable to find direction within a social system (Durkheim, 1897, 1951).

William Spady (1970, 1971) was the first scholar to explicitly link Durkheim's theory to the study of student departure in higher education. Spady argued that dropping out of college could be understood as a form of voluntary withdrawal structurally analogous to Durkheim's egoistic suicide. Just as individuals disengaged from society when they lacked sufficient social ties, students disengaged from their institutions when they failed to form meaningful academic and social bonds. Tinto (1975) extended Spady's application by formalizing the parallels: a student's decision to leave college, like the decision described in Durkheim's framework, reflects a failure of integration, what Tinto called mal-integration, in which the student does not feel sufficiently connected to the institution's academic or social systems to remain committed to it.

The Durkheimian framework carries explanatory power in the community college context examined here. For students in residential four-year institutions, integration may occur through dormitory life, athletic programs, or campus organizations. But for commuter, part-time, and non-traditional students, the primary, and sometimes only, site of institutional contact is classroom. In this setting, faculty relationships serve sociologically vital function: they are the mechanism through which students experience either integration or mal-integration. When a faculty member is welcoming, proactive, and affirming, the student experiences a version of Durkheimian social cohesion, a felt sense that they belong to and are held by the institution. When a faculty member is dismissive, inflexible, or disengaged, the student experiences the opposite: an institutional anomie in which expectations are unclear, support is absent, and the college environment offers no meaningful anchorage. Durkheim's theory thus provides an important sociological lens through which faculty behavior can be understood not merely as a pedagogical matter, but as a structural determinant of whether students remain tethered to or drift away from the college community.

3. Method

This original study employed a qualitative exploratory case study design to investigate how students at a Midwestern community college understood the relationship between faculty interaction and their desire to remain enrolled. The site was a single community college campus serving approximately 1,800 students.

Fifteen student participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Eligible students were at least 21 years old, had completed at least one semester of coursework, and were not enrolled in Health Science programs. These criteria were intended to ensure that participants had sufficient experience to reflect meaningfully on faculty relationships and persistence decisions. Fifteen students participated.

Data was collected during the Spring 2022 term through individual semi-structured Zoom interviews and a brief questionnaire. Interviews lasted about one hour, were recorded with consent, and were transcribed for analysis. Data were coded in NVivo using an inductive thematic approach. Trustworthiness was supported through peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive attention to researcher positionality. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, and all participants were assigned pseudonymous identifiers. All data were stored on a password-protected external

drive in accordance with the data management protocols established at the outset of the study, which stipulated destruction of all research materials three years following the study's completion. That retention period has since elapsed, and all data has been permanently destroyed in full compliance with the ethical guidelines governing this research.

Two research questions guided the study: (a) How do community college students perceive the influence of faculty relationship-building on their desire to remain enrolled? and (b) What challenges do students perceive in building faculty relationships that support continued attendance?

4. Findings

4.1 Faculty Care Functioned as a Form of Integration

Participants consistently described faculty personal qualities as central to their motivation to stay in college. Students valued instructors who were welcoming, encouraging, accessible, and nonjudgmental. They interpreted these behaviors not as personality extras, but as signals of whether they belonged in the academic environment. The first class session was repeatedly described as especially important because it shaped students' early sense of whether a course and, by extension, the institution felt supportive. As Participant 3 explained:

Instructors should be welcoming and have an open mind. On the first day of school, instructors should not seem closed off. You can feel the eagerness to teach, that excitement to meet new students... Just feeling like you know they're excited to be here makes you want to be excited to be there too.

This comment captures a key dynamic in the data: faculty enthusiasm and warmth influenced students' own emotional investment in learning. Students were more likely to attend, ask questions, complete coursework, and imagine themselves persisting when faculty created classroom climates that felt safe and affirming.

Other participants described the stakes of first impressions in even sharper terms. Participant 14 stated: "I think it's so important for teachers to be passionate about what they're doing... When you're not invested, those students will not want to be invested either." Participant 5 reinforced this concern from the opposite direction, observing that some instructors were "just teaching, it was just a job to them, it wasn't a passion." These testimonies reveal that students read faculty engagement not merely as a stylistic preference, but as a signal of institutional commitment. When faculty approached teaching with visible care, students interpreted that care as evidence that the institution valued their presence. When faculty appeared indifferent, students read that indifference as a form of institutional dismissal.

Through Tinto's lens, and extending it through Durkheim's framework, these findings suggest that faculty care serves both social and academic functions. It promotes social integration by helping students feel seen and valued, and it promotes academic integration by lowering the interpersonal

barriers to participation, help-seeking, and persistence. In Durkheimian terms, a passionate and welcoming instructor provides the moral regulation and social bond that Durkheim identified as protective against withdrawal: the student becomes anchored to the institution through the faculty member's visible investment in them.

4.2 Proactive Communication Strengthened Persistence

Students not only valued faculty availability: they also valued faculty initiative. Participants described communication as most meaningful when instructors reached out before problems escalated. Formal recognition practices, such as the institution's Kudos program, were appreciated because they communicated that faculty noticed student effort. Even more powerful, however, was direct and proactive encouragement during moments of difficulty.

As Participant 13 stated: “Sometimes I need a little cheerleader in my corner, so I feel like my course instructors are always in my corner; if I would ever need anything, they would help me out.” This statement reveals that communication was experienced as relational support, not merely information exchange. Timely emails, substantive assignment feedback, reminders, and one-on-one check-ins helped students interpret struggle as manageable rather than terminal.

Participant 9 highlighted the institution's Kudos program as one specific vehicle for this kind of recognition: “We have a kudos program where an instructor can highlight good work that you've done... your teacher can attach messages directly to you, but then it's sent throughout the school.” Such institutional recognition practices extended the relational function of communication beyond the individual classroom, signaling that student effort was seen and valued at the institutional level. However, Participant 5 underscored the limits of student-initiated outreach: “Accepted” This testimony is particularly significant because it reveals an asymmetry in the help-seeking dynamic. Many students, particularly those managing mental health challenges, financial stress, or personal crises, will not initiate contact even when they need it most. Faculty who wait passively for students to come to them may inadvertently reinforce the very isolation that leads to departure.

This finding strengthens the application of Tinto's model by showing that integration is not passive. Students may not always initiate contact, particularly when they are uncertain, overwhelmed, or unfamiliar with college norms. Faculty who proactively communicate make integration more accessible. In this sense, persistence is supported not only by student engagement but also by institutional support that reduces barriers to engagement.

4.3 Relational Gaps Amplified Withdrawal Risk, Especially for Vulnerable Students

Participants also identified clear barriers to productive faculty-student relationships. Some were student-centered, including anxiety, depression, financial stress, family obligations, and low self-confidence. Others were faculty-centered, including dismissive communication, inflexibility, poor classroom management, lack of enthusiasm, and weak feedback practices. Students described these barriers as mutually reinforcing. Personal vulnerability made relational support more necessary, while negative faculty behavior made support harder to access.

Participant 10 reflected: “I’m bipolar, and I was feeling quite attacked by this professor; we had a conversation and I told her everything I felt. She was going to be the cause of me dropping out of her class because she was so harsh.” This testimony illustrates how faculty behavior can become a tipping point in persistence decisions, especially when students are already navigating significant life stressors. Participant 1 offered a parallel account of institutional inequity when after disclosing a medical procedure and requesting a one-day extension, the request was denied, while a classmate received an extension without the same scrutiny. Participant 1 shared: “I carried this situation the entire eight weeks, and it reflected in my performance.” These experiences illustrate what Durkheim would recognize as institutional anomie, i.e., students left without clear, consistently applied expectations, sensing that the rules of the institution do not apply equally to them and that their presence is conditional rather than valued.

Participant 2 described a different but equally discouraging dynamic: “I had an instructor who would read what I read at home and say this is how I teach. I felt like that was pretty disappointing... I just wanted to get a passing grade to get out of this class.” This statement reflects not only low academic engagement but also a withdrawal of investment from the learning relationship itself, a form of disintegration in which the student is physically present but relationally absent. Participant 11 added another dimension, noting that a private learning disability created barriers to engagement: “I had a learning disability, it was more private, and nobody knew.” For this student, the absence of a trusting faculty relationship meant that the accommodation needs that could have supported success remained unaddressed.

Participants also emphasized the importance of institutional support services such as tutoring, TRIO, student government, and student life programming. Yet many learned about these resources only through faculty referrals. Participant 4 credited the tutoring center specifically: “I was told about the tutoring center and how I could turn in a paper and get feedback before it was time to turn it in for a grade. This was highly beneficial.” Participant 1 similarly described how campus involvement transformed the college experience: “The college has been very inclusive. I have been able to join some campus groups like student government and be a part of TRIO.” This pattern suggests that faculty play an important bridging role between instruction and support infrastructure. When they do so effectively, they extend students' networks of integration. When they do not, students may remain disconnected from services that could stabilize their enrollment.

5. Discussion

This study reinforces the claim that student retention in community colleges is fundamentally relational. Students in this study did not describe persistence as a simple function of academic ability or individual motivation. Instead, they described it as contingent on whether faculty relationships fostered belonging, confidence, communication, and connection to support.

5.1 Durkheim, Integration, and the Sociology of Student Departure

The findings of this study take on deeper significance when read through the sociological lens that Durkheim first provided and that Tinto later applied to higher education. Durkheim (1897,1951)

argued that the primary social threat to individual well-being was not suffering or hardship per se, but the absence of integration, the severing of bonds between the individual and the group. When those bonds are absent or insufficient, individuals lose the sense of purpose and belonging that makes continued participation in social life meaningful. Tinto (1975) extended this logic to the academy, arguing that student departure could be understood as a form of voluntary withdrawal analogous to Durkheim's egoistic suicide: the student failing to find meaningful integration in the college environment chooses to separate from it.

The student voices in this study give that theoretical claim a human face. When Participant 3 described wanting to feel that their instructor was "excited to be here," they were articulating a need for the kind of social bond that Durkheim identified as foundational. When Participant 10 described feeling "attacked" by a harsh professor and nearly dropping out, they were describing an experience of institutional mal-integration, the very condition that Tinto, following Durkheim, identified as a primary driver of departure. When Participant 1 described carrying the weight of an unfair extension denial "the entire eight weeks" and watching it affect their performance, they were experiencing a form of institutional anomie: an environment whose norms felt arbitrary, inconsistent, and indifferent to their humanity.

For community college students, many of whom are adult learners, first-generation students, or individuals managing significant external pressures, the risk of mal-integration is structurally heightened. Unlike students in residential institutions who encounter multiple overlapping social systems, community college students may interact with the institution almost exclusively through the classroom. This means that a single faculty relationship, or its absence, can determine whether a student experiences the college as a supportive community or as an indifferent bureaucracy. Faculty, in this context, are not peripheral to the institution's integrative function; they are that function. They serve as the human face of the institution and, in Durkheimian terms, as the primary agents through whom students come to feel either bound to or estranged from the academic community.

Importantly, Durkheim's concept of anomie also helps explain findings beyond interpersonal warmth. Students who did not know about campus resources, who were unsure of institutional expectations, or who received inconsistent treatment from faculty were not simply experiencing interpersonal disappointment. They were experiencing a normative gap, an environment that failed to provide the clarity, predictability, and moral guidance that Durkheim identified as necessary for sustained social participation. Faculty who proactively communicate expectations, who apply policies consistently, and who actively connect students to support services are therefore performing an anti-anomic function are supplying the institutional order and relational security that makes continued engagement possible.

These findings deepen the application of Tinto's Student Integration Framework in several ways. First, they confirm that academic and social integration are intertwined rather than separate processes. Students did not distinguish sharply between a faculty member's instructional competence and relational approach. Timely feedback, enthusiasm, flexibility, and caring were

experienced simultaneously as teaching practices and as signals of social inclusion. This matters because it suggests that academic performance and persistence decisions are shaped by the relational conditions under which learning occurs.

Second, the study highlights how the community college context complicates traditional interpretations of integration. In commuter and non-residential settings, students may have fewer opportunities for informal campus involvement. As a result, faculty become disproportionately important as carriers of institutional culture. They are often the people through whom students encounter the college's values, expectations, and willingness to support them. This is especially consequential for adult learners and students managing work, caregiving, mental health challenges, or financial strain.

Third, the findings connect individual experiences to broader issues central to the retention literature. Students' descriptions of welcoming faculty and proactive communication speak directly to student satisfaction and social integration. Their emphasis on feedback, encouragement, and help-seeking connects to academic integration and is likely to affect academic performance. Their accounts of mental health stress, family obligations, and confidence gaps demonstrate how demographic and life-context differences shape students' ability to access support. Together, these findings suggest that persistence cannot be understood apart from the relational environments in which students attempt to learn.

Fourth, this study affirms the enduring relevance of Durkheim's sociology for understanding community college retention. While Durkheim's work predates higher education by a century, its central insight, that human beings require both social integration and normative guidance to sustain participation in social systems, maps directly onto the experiences of students in this study. Students who found faculty who cared, communicated, and connected them to support were experiencing a form of institutional solidarity. Students who encountered harsh, indifferent, or inconsistent faculty were experiencing its absence. The implications are not merely interpersonal; they are structural. Retention, understood through a Durkheimian lens, is not simply a matter of whether students have academic preparation or personal resilience to persist. It is a matter of whether the institution provides the conditions for integration, and whether the people within it, especially faculty, act as agents of that integration.

5.2 Faculty as the Cornerstone of Student Persistence

The findings of this study offer compelling evidence that faculty are not simply instructional deliverers of academic content, they are, in the most consequential sense, the institution's most direct point of contact with students' lived experiences. In the community college environment, where students frequently navigate the competing demands of employment, caregiving, financial hardship, and prior educational trauma, the faculty member may be the single most reliable human presence students encounter throughout their academic journey. This elevated relational role places faculty in a position of considerable influence, not merely over grades or academic outcomes, but over whether students experience themselves as capable, welcomed, and worthy of

continued investment in their own education. The weight of that influence should not be underestimated, nor should it be treated as incidental to the work of teaching. It is, in many respects, the work of teaching in its most essential form.

This understanding is consistent with and extends the conclusions of Cuseo (2018), who described faculty-student engagement as one of the highest-leverage interventions available to institutions seeking to improve student success. It also aligns with the decades of research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), wherein they demonstrated that the quality and frequency of student-faculty contact, particularly informal, non-classroom interaction, are among the strongest institutional predictors of both cognitive development and persistence. What the present study contributes beyond these foundational findings is a granular, student-centered account of precisely how that influence operates in a community college setting. Students in this study did not describe persistence in abstract or institutional terms; they described it in deeply relational ones. They stayed because a faculty member noticed them, encouraged them, or reached out at a critical moment. They considered leaving because a faculty member did not. The line between persistence and departure, in these accounts, was frequently drawn not by academic performance but by human interaction, or its absence.

The relational role of faculty in student persistence must also be understood in light of the specific vulnerabilities that characterize the community college student population. Community college students are disproportionately likely to be first-generation college students, adult learners, members of historically underrepresented groups, and individuals managing poverty or mental health challenges (Tinto, 2017). For these students, the decision to enroll in college is often already an act of significant personal courage and resource allocation. When they arrive in the classroom, they carry with them not only academic goals, but also histories of institutional disappointment, self-doubt, and competing obligations that continuously threaten to overwhelm their commitment to remain enrolled. In this context, the faculty member's response to a struggling student, whether marked by warmth or indifference, flexibility or rigidity, affirmation or dismissal, can function as a decisive turning point in the student's educational trajectory. A single interaction that communicates genuine care can restore a student's sense of belonging. A single interaction that communicates contempt or indifference can unravel it entirely.

Faculty influence on persistence operates through multiple interacting channels simultaneously. At the most immediate level, faculty shapes the classroom climate, the degree to which a learning environment feels psychologically safe, intellectually stimulating, and personally affirming. Students who perceive their classroom as a place where they are respected and genuinely expected to succeed are more likely to engage actively, seek help proactively, and develop the academic confidence that sustains persistence through periods of difficulty (Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019; Ingraham et al., 2018). At a structural level, faculty also serve as critical connectors between students and the broader institutional support ecosystem. Tutoring centers, TRIO programs, counseling services, and disability accommodations may be formally available on a given campus, but they remain effectively inaccessible to students who do not know they exist or who do not feel personally empowered to use them. Faculty who actively refer students to these services, who take

the deliberate step of saying, in essence, this resource exists and it is for you, extend their relational influence far beyond the confines of the classroom and into the institutional structures that make sustained enrollment possible.

It is equally important to recognize that faculty influence on persistence is not limited to its positive expressions. The data from this study make unmistakably clear that faculty behavior can be a source of institutional harm as well as institutional support. When faculty are dismissive, inconsistent, or relationally unavailable, they do not simply fail to support integration, they actively contribute to a student's disintegration from the academic community. The experiences reported by participants in this study, including being denied accommodations granted to peers, feeling personally attacked by a professor's demeanor, and enduring courses in which the instructor conveyed no discernible investment in either the subject matter or the students, represent more than individual dissatisfactions. They represent relational failures with measurable structural consequences. Each of these experiences communicated to a student that the institution did not regard their presence as valuable, and in doing so, moved that student meaningfully closer to the decision to leave. Understanding faculty as persistence-critical actors therefore requires institutions to attend not only to what faculty do well, but to the conditions under which faculty cause harm, and to build the accountability structures and professional development frameworks necessary to interrupt those harmful patterns before they accumulate into attrition.

In sum, the evidence from this study positions faculty not as peripheral contributors to the retention enterprise, but as its central architects. The relationships faculty build, or fail to build, are among the most powerful determinants of whether community college students experience their institution as a place of genuine possibility or a place of indifference. For institutions committed to improving persistence outcomes, particularly among populations that have historically been underserved by higher education, investing in the relational capacity of faculty is not simply a recommended best practice. It is a foundational institutional obligation, one that must be embedded in how faculty are hired, onboarded, evaluated, and supported throughout their careers.

Finally, the study contributes to professional development education by clarifying that faculty development should not focus only on content expertise or course design. It should also address relational pedagogy: how faculty communicate care, initiate support, respond to distress, and connect students to institutional resources. If persistence is partly produced through everyday faculty behavior, then relationship-building should be treated as a core instructional competency.

5.3 Implications for Professional Development and Practice

The findings suggest several concrete directions for community college practice. First, institutions should position relationship-building as a faculty responsibility central to student success rather than as an optional interpersonal style. Professional development should explicitly address how first-day climate, feedback practices, responsiveness, and instructor approachability shape student integration.

Second, colleges should normalize proactive communication. Early outreach, encouraging check-ins, recognition systems, and individualized follow-up during academic difficulty can help students feel supported before they disengage. These practices are especially valuable for students who may be reluctant to seek help independently.

Third, faculty development should include preparation in trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and emotionally aware pedagogy. Participants' accounts show that harsh or dismissive classroom interactions can be especially damaging for students experiencing anxiety, depression, financial stress, or family strain. Training faculty to respond constructively to struggle is therefore both a pedagogical and a retention strategy.

Fourth, institutions should better connect instructional and support systems. Because students often learn about tutoring, TRIO, and other resources through faculty, instructors should be equipped with referral knowledge and clear protocols. Faculty cannot solve every student problem, but they can serve as effective connectors within a coordinated support network.

6. Limitations

The original study was conducted at a single community college campus with 15 participants, which limits transferability. Because the sample focused on adult, non-Health Science students, the findings may not reflect the experiences of all community college populations. In addition, data were collected remotely, which may have shaped the depth or tone of participant responses. Finally, the researcher's role as an insider to the institutional context required ongoing reflexive attention to positionality throughout the study.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that faculty relationship-building is not ancillary to community college retention; it is one of the primary ways students experience integration, belonging, and the possibility of persistence. Through the lens of Tinto's Student Integration Framework, the findings reveal that students remain enrolled not simply because they are academically capable, but because they encounter faculty and institutional environments that help them imagine continued success.

For community colleges, this insight is significant. If faculty care, proactive communication, and referral-minded practice help convert vulnerability into persistence, then professional development aimed at relational pedagogy is not supplemental work. It is retention work. Future research should examine how structured faculty development, mentoring systems, and proactive communication models affect persistence and academic outcomes across more diverse community college contexts.

This study also calls for a broadening of the theoretical frameworks applied to community college retention. The explicit integration of Durkheim's sociological framework alongside Tinto's model invites researchers to attend not only to individual integration outcomes but to the structural conditions that enable or inhibit integration in the first place. Future studies might investigate how

institutional policies around grading, extensions, accommodation, and faculty accountability shape the normative environment students encounter and how consistency, fairness, and transparency in those policies function as structural supports for retention. Research that centers student voice, as this study does, remains essential to keeping these questions grounded in the lived realities of the students that community colleges exist to serve.

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