# When belief precedes being: How attitudes and motivation before matriculation lead to fit and academic performance

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### ABSTRACT

In academic settings, recent work has shown that feelings of connectedness among students are associated with attrition intentions and retention. However, research has not examined how perceptions of connectedness and motivation to succeed prior to matriculation relate to early attrition intentions. Via moderated regression analyses, we find embeddedness and motivational constructs play unique predictive roles, and that ethnicity moderates the relationship between embeddedness and attrition intentions. Additionally, mediation analyses indicate that embeddedness and aspects of motivation can have an indirect effect on attrition intentions through perceptions of complementary and supplementary fit. Finally, moderated mediation analyses reveal that the indirect effect of embeddedness on attrition intentions through Complementary Fit is stronger for ethnic minorities. These findings demonstrate the broad range of consequences embeddedness and other attitudinal constructs held by students prior to matriculation can have on subsequent behavior and attitudes.

## 1. Introduction

Tinto (2010) has argued that academic and social integration has been identified as a key factor leading to student retention in university settings (Astin, 1984, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). He pointed out, however, that little is known about achieving such a state. This lack of knowledge is problematic since it leaves institutions with few concrete options to combat attrition. In fact, despite the amount of research on retention, college completion rates seem unchanged (Carey, 2004). Tinto's (2010) opinion was that part of the reason research has not made an impact is due to the fact that much of the focus has been on factors outside of the institution's control. It is likely that retention research has maintained this focus due to Tinto's (1975) influential theory of student dropout, where family background, individual attributes, and precollege schooling serve as the precursors to his hypothesized adjustment process. Work by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980, 1983) demonstrated the utility of taking these precursors into account, as models that incorporate this information generally explain more variance in eventual attrition. Yet the problem of institutional action remains, and as a possible path forward Tinto (2010) suggested shifting the conceptual focus from why students eventually leave to understanding the factors that make students stay.

Employee turnover research has experienced a parallel shift from a focus on the reasons why people leave to including a greater understanding of why people stay, with a particular emphasis on how they become enmeshed or embedded within an organization because of their fit with the environment and the links that they have established with others (Lee, Burch, & Mitchell, 2014). This work has been applied to academic settings, where embeddedness has been demonstrated to be associated with

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attrition intentions and retention (Larkin, Brasel, & Pines, 2013). However, research focusing on the influence of embeddedness on decisions to stay or leave examines individuals who are already members of an institution or university, and has not considered the possibility of how perceptions of fit and connections prior to joining an organization can influence how well an individual adapts to a new environment (Larkin et al., 2013; Van Vianen, Stoelhorst, & De Goede, 2013). That is, even at the point of matriculation, students may vary in how connected they feel to their university and these pre-entry perceptions and connections may be particularly important for newcomer outcomes, as the research on socialization shows (Bauer & Erdogan, 2014). In this paper, we apply findings related to embeddedness within organizations to a university student population. Further, we examine how perceptions underlying embeddedness before matriculation relate to attrition intentions, withdrawal behavior, and academic performance after joining the university. In doing so, we challenge the notion that embeddedness is solely useful for understanding why established organizational members remain in their positions (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). In addition, the establishment of perceptions of embeddedness before matriculation, which we refer to further as pre-entry embeddedness, may provide a new target for institutional action.

In addition to examining the concept of pre-entry embeddedness and its relation to important outcomes, our work contributes to the literature in several other ways. First, we consider the role of motivational constructs linked to persistence and success (e.g., grit; Duckworth & Gross, 2014) and self-efficacy (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998) in relation to the role of pre-entry embeddedness and the outcomes of interest. Larkin et al. (2013) demonstrated that embeddedness predisposes students to remain at their university, but at the same time Tinto (2010) argued that past work has pointed to self-efficacy as being as important to college success as basic academic skills (Hall & Ponton, 2005). Examining embeddedness and motivation together is important to understanding ways in which students without connections to a university before matriculation may navigate the early adjustment period. Second, while person-organization (P-O) fit is often considered in the recruitment literature as a predictor of organizational membership decisions (e.g., job offer acceptance; Cable & Judge, 1996), we consider fit as a mediator between pre-entry perceptions and outcomes, providing some insight into what might contribute to the formation of student fit perceptions (Yu & Yang, 2013). This approach addresses what Tinto (2010) has identified as a shortcoming of the retention literature, as little is known about what precursors aside from contextual factors exist in determining integration, which we argue bears substantial similarity to fit. Finally, recent work by Mallol, Holtom, and Lee (2007) has begun to investigate the role of ethnicity in how individuals perceive embeddedness and we extend their work by examining how the two relate both prior to entry and to retention down the line. Examining this process in an academic context is particularly important since past work shows that minority students on mostly Caucasian campuses are likely to view their environment as unsupportive, which may have a negative effect on their engagement with academic tasks (Fleming, 1984; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). With the inclusion of motivation, fit, and ethnicity, we advance our understanding of embeddedness by identifying the overlap and points of distinction embeddedness has with constructs that guide our understanding of students in a university setting. Fig. 1 outlines the proposed relationships that will be investigated in this study, which will be explained below.
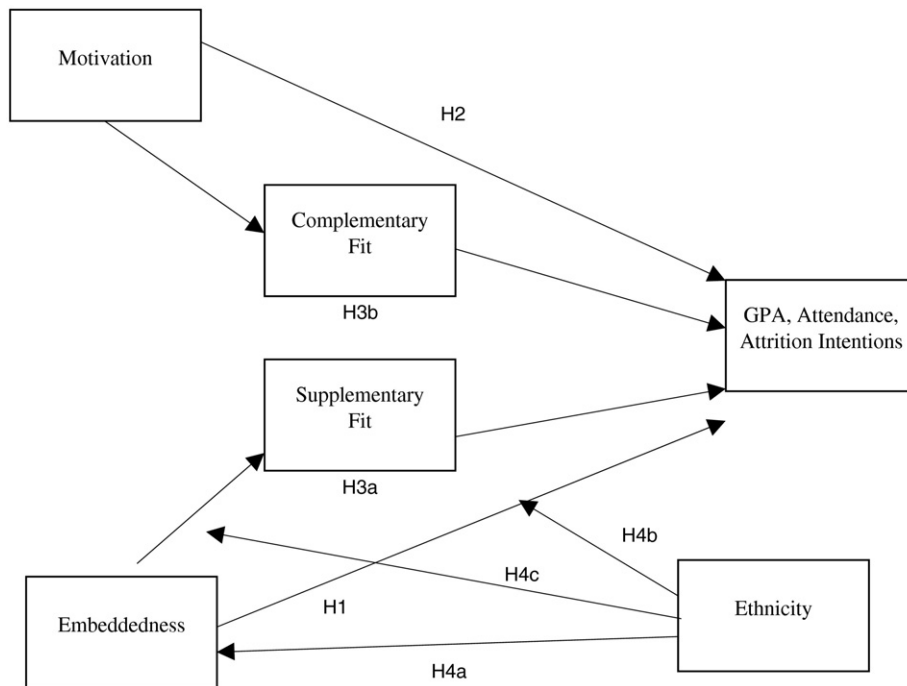


**Fig. 1.** Proposed relationships between studied variables. Note. Motivation in the figure represents both Grit and Self-Efficacy. The outcomes of GPA, Attendance, and Attrition Intentions are also represented by a single object.