UNDERSTANDING COMMITMENT IN STUDENTS' PERSISTENCE DECISIONS

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By
Matthew W. Savage

Thesis Committee:
Amy S. E. Hubbard, Chairperson
Krystyna S. Aune
Renee E. Strom
We certify that we have read this thesis and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Speech.

THESIS COMMITTEE

Amy Hubbard
Chairperson

Kathleen Anne

Anne Stine
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Just as individuals are faced with the decision to stay or leave their relationships, students are faced with the important decision to persist or depart their colleges or universities before graduation. Student departure, defined as leaving an institution prior to graduation, is a problem for institutions of higher education. In 1982, Tinto emphasized that over the last 100 years the national rate of student departure from colleges and universities has remained constant at 45 percent. Today’s departure rates are no better; recently the American College Testing Program reported that nationwide 60 percent of students at four-year public institutions departed their institutions before graduating (ACT Institutional Data File, 2006). These statistics are descriptive of university dynamics and students’ goals, academic experiences, social interaction, and commitment to their institutions. As colleges compete for student enrollment, retention rates serve as an important source of information to guide students and their families in choosing which institution to attend. Current rates of student departure, then, adversely affect the public’s perception of the quality of colleges and universities (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). In fact, widely publicized national rankings, such as those in the U.S. News and World Report, use retention statistics as a measure of university quality when ranking institutions. Thus, advancing scholarship concerning college student departure is important for both students and universities.

A consistent recommendation of research regarding college student departure has been to focus on understanding ‘institutional commitment,’ or more precisely students’ commitment to their institutions (Braxton & Lee, 2005; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson,
Students' commitment has been extensively investigated through Tinto's model of student persistence (1993). An overarching limitation of past research on this commitment has been that investigations have operated from the student perspective, not considering an institution's commitment to students. However, both student commitment and institution commitment are relevant in the higher education setting. Other disciplines have examined commitment as well. For example, commitment is a well studied concept within the discipline of relational communication, and understanding the transactional nature of commitment between students and their institutions may be much like understanding how commitment exists within romantic relationships. As such, the purpose of this investigation is to extend the theoretical understanding of Tinto's model of student persistence by drawing on relational communication research to elaborate on the role of commitment in student departure.

To accomplish this, an initial overview of college student departure literature will be presented. This will be followed by an explanation of Tinto's Interactionalist Theory, a critique of Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence, and the current research on students' commitment to an institution. Next, a clarification of the conceptualization and measurement of commitment will be offered, followed by an examination of institutions' commitment to students. Students' subsequent commitment and persistence will then be discussed. Finally, commitment will be examined through a relational framework for understanding commitment.

College Student Departure

There is a long line of inquiry regarding college student departure decisions; issues of student retention, persistence, attrition, and graduation have been important
objects of empirical inquiry within higher education for some time (Reason, 2003).

Berger and Lyon (2005) described that research on student departure dates back as far as 1800, with a boom in research from the late 1920s until now (for reviews, see Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Summerskill, 1962). Many of the early research studies on college student departure were conducted through a psychological lens, which focused on the personality attributes (e.g., maturity and motivation) of students as the main reasons for persistence or departure (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Research from this perspective identified students who did not persist as deviant from the rest of the student population (Tinto, 1993). These investigations were filled with clichéd portraits of student dropouts as having distinct personality profiles who lacked important attributes (e.g., intelligence, self-esteem, and motivation) needed for college completion. In the 1970s research took a new direction and began to focus on how colleges and universities could make changes to or develop programs that aimed to increase the retention of their students (Tinto, 1993). This type of research has continued for the last 35 years.

Given the extensive amount and long history of college student departure research, an essential first step for this investigation is to examine how terminology within the discipline has been conceptually defined. Specifically, this is an important contextual issue as two flaws regarding the use and definition of key terminology exist within college student departure literature. One flaw is that terminology within the discipline has often been used interchangeably. Berger and Lyon (2005) noted that although terminology such as persistence, retention, attrition, graduate, dropout, and departure are closely related, they are not synonymous, and yet, many researchers utilized them as such. A second flaw is that many terms, such as those mentioned, have been
inconsistently defined across studies (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Hagedorn, 2005). The slippage in their conceptualizations has led to confusion when trying to generalize across studies. In an attempt to manage these two flaws, the definitions presented here are from Berger and Lyon (2005) and Hagedorn (2005). These researchers have distinguished terminology to offer clarity within the study of college student departure.

**Key Terminology**

*Student departure.* The phrase student departure is an umbrella term that can refer to more specific definitions, all encompassing those students who do not persist at an institution, such as dropouts, stopouts, and dismissals (Hagedorn, 2005). Dropouts are those students whose initial educational goal was to complete at least a bachelor's degree but who did not complete it. Stopouts are specifically those students who only temporarily withdraw from an institution. Dismissal refers to students who are not permitted by the institution to continue enrollment.

*Persistence, retention, and departure.* Both terms are often used interchangeably, but according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007) retention is regarded as an institutional measure and persistence is used as a student measure. Simply put, institutions retain and students persist (Hagedorn, 2005). Persistence and retention are typically defined as staying at an institution until degree completion (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Further, a student will only be considered a persister in the present investigation if they complete their prescribed course of study within four years.\(^1\) In addition, the terms persistence and departure can be a source of confusion for researchers and administrators alike. In the past, focus was placed on student departure rates, hence the term (name) used to indicate this area of scholarship and literature. However, more recently a new
focus has emerged in this area of literature to explain why students persist, rather than depart. These are inherently linked questions, but depending on which is being investigated speaks to the position that students are thought to hold in the student-institution relationship. Persistence suggests that students are able to voluntarily choose to attend or leave an institution of higher education. While college student departure will be referred to here as an area of literature and discipline of study, it is students' persistence decisions that are being examined in the current investigation.

Attrition. The term attrition refers to the statistical representation of departure from an institutional perspective. Attrition is the diminution in numbers of students resulting from lower student retention (Hagedorn, 2005).

Graduate and graduation. A graduate is commonly defined as a former student who has completed a prescribed course of study in a college or university. All graduates have persisted, but not all persisters will graduate. Moreover, a graduate can only claim one institution regardless of prior enrollment at other institutions. A source of confusion then arises where an institution from which a student graduates will count the student as a persister, while previously attended institutions would likely count the student as a nonpersister or dropout. The possibility of transfer students being an issue of retention rates at one institution and departure rates at another affects the validity of these statistics from a macro perspective (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

Tinto's Interactionalist Theory

Many theoretical bases have been explored to explain college student departure, including, but not limited to, economic models (St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000), psychological models (Bean & Eaton, 2000), sociological models (Bean & Metzner,
Although the phenomenon of college student departure has been examined from many theoretical models (Tinto, 1986, 1993), Tinto's interactionalist theory is the most cited and widely researched perspective of understanding college student retention, achieving "near paradigmatic" stature (Braxton, Millem, & Sullivan, 2000, p. 107). Tinto (1975) synthesized the research literature on college student departure, criticizing the lack of theoretical formulations to account for college student departure and as a remedy postulated an interactionalist theory of college student departure. Currently, Tinto's interactionalist theory of college student departure (1975) has been revised (1993) and has been distilled by researchers (e.g., Braxton, 2000) as a model of 13 propositions to explain student persistence.

Elements of Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Persistence

Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence describes a longitudinal process whereby individual students develop commitments (e.g., to the goal of graduation and to the institution) based on their interactions with the formal and informal systems of a college or university. The model takes into account several factors related to students; including student entry characteristics, initial student commitment to the goal of graduation, initial student commitment to the institution, academic integration, social integration, subsequent student commitment to the goal of graduation, subsequent student commitment to the institution, and persistence decisions.

Student entry characteristics. These characteristics include students' precollege schooling experiences, family background, and individual qualities. Precollege schooling experiences are characterized by students' high school achievement. Family background
characteristics include parental expectations, parent education-level, and family socioeconomic status. Individual qualities are essentially descriptive of students, including demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity.

*Initial student commitment to the goal of graduation.* This initial commitment refers to the extent to which students value an undergraduate degree at the time that they enter their college or university (Brower, 1992). Within Tinto’s model of student persistence, the element of initial student commitment to the goal of graduation illustrates the commitment that students may feel toward earning a college education.

*Initial student commitment to the institution.* This initial commitment refers to the extent to which students value their particular college or university at the time they enter the college or university (Brower, 1992; Tinto, 1993). Many researchers refer to this initial commitment to an institution in terms of a student’s preference to attend a college or university among all their choices of colleges or universities to attend.

*Academic integration.* Academic integration is made up of structural and normative dimensions of the college or university. Structural dimensions are the explicit standards of the college or university. These explicit standards are most commonly indexed by academic performance such as grades because they offer an assessment of students’ ability to meet the institutional standards of student academic achievement. On the other hand, students’ normative interaction is characterized by their actual intellectual development, reflecting the students’ appraisal of the academic system.

*Social integration.* Social integration deals with the degree of congruency between the individual student and the social system of the institution; characterized by the level of informal interaction between the students and their peers as well as
extracurricular activities and interactions with faculty and staff. Tinto (1993) defined social integration as the psychological sense of identifying and affiliating with the campus community.

*Subsequent student commitment to the goal of graduation.* This commitment refers to the extent to which students' value earning an undergraduate degree after they have attended a college or university. Tinto (1993) described this commitment in terms of students' disposition toward the academic dimensions of a college or university.

*Subsequent student commitment to the institution.* This commitment refers to the extent to which students value their particular college or university after they have been exposed to the college or university (Brower, 1992; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) described this commitment in terms of students' disposition toward their college or university. Many researchers define the element of subsequent commitment to a college or university in terms of a student's agreement with their institution’s goals and values.

*Persistence.* Persistence is defined as a students' decision to enroll at an institution until degree completion. Overall, the objective of Tinto's model (1993) is to explain and predict students' decision to persist at a college or university.

*Interaction of Model Elements*

Recall that Braxton and colleagues (e.g., Braxton & Lee, 2005; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 2007) have identified 13 testable propositions within Tinto's (1993) interactionalist model of student persistence (see Figure 1). The 13 propositions are: Student entry characteristics independently affect students' initial level of commitment to the goal of graduation (proposition 1), students' initial level of commitment to the institution (proposition 2), and students' persistence (proposition 3). Students' initial
commitment to the goal of graduation independently affects students' social integration (proposition 4) and students' academic integration (proposition 5). Students' initial commitment to the institution independently affects students' social integration (proposition 6) and students' academic integration (proposition 7). Students' initial commitment to goal of graduation and their academic integration independently affect students' subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation (propositions 8 and 9). Students' initial commitment to the institution and students' social integration independently affect students' subsequent commitment to the institution (propositions 10 and 11). Finally, students' subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation and students' subsequent commitment to the institution independently affect students' persistence decision (propositions 12 and 13).

Critique of Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Persistence

Despite the research that has been conducted applying the framework of Tinto's model, little work has been devoted to expanding the theoretical basis for individual parts within the model (Braxton, 2000). Braxton (2000) and others (for a review see Seidman, 2005) criticized the wholesale acceptance of Tinto's model and have put forth a call for new research to "reinvigorate scholarly inquiry on the departure puzzle" (p. 3). Two important critiques of the model have found a lack of empirical support for all of the models propositions, with the exception of those related to the role that social integration and students' commitment to the institution play in student persistence (Braxton & Lee, 2005; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997).
The first major critique of Tinto’s theory was a meta-analysis conducted by Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997). The study empirically and conceptually assessed the degree of support for the 13 propositions they thought were postulated in Tinto's 1975 foundational theory. The investigators used a “box-score” method to assess the magnitude of empirical support of past investigations of each proposition. The magnitude of empirical support was deemed as strong if 66 percent or more of three or more tests of each proposition demonstrated statistical significance. Modest support was accorded if between 34 percent and 65 percent of three or more tests of each proposition exhibited statistical significance. Weak support was garnered if 33 percent or less of three tests or more displayed statistical significance. If fewer than three tests were performed, then indeterminate support was ascribed. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) used this method to judge the overall validity of the model, with the intent to make recommendations about which elements of the model were valid for further theoretical explanation of student persistence. The investigators acknowledged that others may feel that these guidelines should be subject to revision.

Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson’s (1997) empirical examination found support for four propositions: (a) student entry characteristics affected the level of initial commitment to the institution (modest support); (b) students’ initial level of commitment to the institution influenced students’ subsequent level of commitment to the institution (strong support); (c) students’ social integration influenced students’ subsequent level of commitment to the institution (strong support); and (d) students’ subsequent commitment to the institution influenced student persistence in college (strong support). Braxton,
Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) recommended investigating the elements of social integration and students’ commitment to the institution as possible cornerstones for future theoretical elaboration.

*Braxton and Lee (2005)*

More recently, a second critique of Tinto’s model was carried out in the form of an extensive meta-analysis by Braxton and Lee (2005). These researchers sought to identify the reliability of each of the 13 propositions of Tinto’s (1993) revised model. Braxton and Lee (2005) deemed a proposition as “reliable knowledge” when it met the following methodological criteria: First, only studies that used multivariate statistical procedures were considered. Second, more than two affirming between group experimental designs had to have been conducted for a proposition to be considered reliable. Third, a threshold of ten or more tests had to be considered as a basis for determining reliability. With these criteria met, if 70% of the ten or more tests found affirming results then reliable knowledge was considered obtained. Like Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997), mixed results were reported regarding each of the 13 propositions. For Braxton and Lee (2005), three propositions were designated as reliable knowledge: (a) initial commitment to the institution affected the level of subsequent commitment to the institution, (b) students’ social integration affected students’ subsequent commitment to the institution, and (c) subsequent commitment to the institution affected student persistence in college. The investigators pointed out that the degree of reliability for each of these three interlocking relationships exceeded 80%. Braxton and Lee (2005) also isolated social integration and students’ commitment to an institution as key elements for further inquiry within Tinto’s model (1993).
These two critiques of Tinto’s interactionalist model (1993) reveal that there is a lack of empirical evidence of the model’s overall internal validity. The findings of Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) and Braxton and Lee (2005) concerning the model’s individual propositions both suggest further examination of social integration and students’ commitment to their institution. Much research to date has already examined social integration in depth (for a review see Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Thus, for the purposes of this investigation, another avenue for studying college student departure will be taken by focusing on commitment. The empirically backed propositions of both critiques demonstrate that students’ commitment to their institution warrants further investigation. Investigating students’ commitment to their institution is a needed step to advance theoretical elaboration of Tinto’s model. This study will focus on explaining students’ subsequent commitment to an institution.

Current State of Research on Students’ Commitment to an Institution

Many studies have investigated students’ commitment to an institution. Recall, students’ commitment to an institution refers to the extent to which students value their particular college or university (Tinto, 1993). Tinto described this commitment in terms of students’ disposition toward the social system of the college. But, Tinto did not explicitly define students’ commitment to an institution. Tinto (1993) only said, “Commitments indicate the degree to which individuals are committed...to the institution into which they gain entry (institutional commitment)” (p. 115). Similar to Tinto, other college student departure researchers have not explicitly defined commitment either. On the other hand, the operational definitions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) of both students’ initial and subsequent commitment to their institutions offer some insight into
how each is conceptualized. Initial institutional commitment is generally measured with one item that asks students to think about the institutions they considered attending and indicate their relative ranking of the institution they are currently attending. For example, the question is generally phrased as, “Was this University your 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, or other?” Subsequent commitment to an institution is measured by asking the degree that students agree with the following statements: “It is important to graduate from this University,” “I am confident that I made the right decision to attend this University,” and “I am sure that this University is the right place for me.” Although the operationalization of students’ commitment to an institution gives some sense of its conceptualization, several limitations exist regarding students’ commitment.

Limitations of Tinto’s Commitment

Lack of clarity. The way in which Tinto (1993) and others have investigated the construct of students’ commitment is limited in its conceptualization and measurement for two distinct reasons. First, students’ subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation and students’ subsequent commitment to an institution are confounded. Once students attend a college or university, they cannot be committed to an institution without the goal to eventually graduate from that institution. For example, one of the items to measure students’ subsequent commitment to an institution illustrates that these two subsequent commitments are inherently connected, “It is important to graduate from this University” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). In other words, this item concurrently asks students’ of their subsequent commitment to their institution and their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation. Students’ subsequent commitment to an institution and students’ subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation are not
mutually exclusive. Thus, using two variables to capture one phenomenon is not isomorphic with reality. Second, a definition of commitment is not provided by Tinto (1975, 1993). Tinto (1993) only provided a tautological definition of commitment; he basically defined commitment as commitment. This ambiguous definition requires researchers to make assumptions about how to conceptualize and measure students’ commitment to an institution.

Singular party. Researchers who have looked at ‘institutional commitment’ focused on the commitment that students are assumed to develop for their institutions. Even those who have critiqued Tinto’s work within the field of higher education (for a review see Seidman, 2005) have operated from the paradigm that commitment is something that only students feel for their institution of higher education. However, there are two parties involved, students and institutions. The commitment that students’ perceive from their institution must also be taken into consideration.

Lack of predictive framework. Although educational researchers have adequately accounted for the influence of students’ commitment on persistence, there is a lack of framework in Tinto’s (1993) model to explain what causes changes in students’ commitment to an institution. Researchers have not expanded on what drives the development or deterioration of students’ commitment to their institutions. With the exception of social integration, no research has identified a consistent variety of factors that appear to be important in affecting students’ commitment to their institution.

New Direction

Students’ commitment to an institution has been identified as a valid predictor of persistence (Braxton & Lee, 2005; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). However, as
described here, several limitations exist within past research regarding Tinto's (1993) notion of commitment. Braxton and Hirschy (2005) have noted the need for a multidisciplinary approach in attempting to overcome limitations of college student departure research. A multi-disciplinary approach for improving the limitations discussed is theory elaboration, which entails the application of concepts from separate theoretical perspectives to explain a phenomenon (Thornberry, 1989). The discipline of relational communication is a useful source for theory elaboration, as it has a long history of investigating the construct of commitment. Relational communication researchers have examined commitment in an attempt to understand why some relationships survive and others do not. Thus, utilizing relational communication research as a source for theoretical elaboration of Tinto's (1993) interactionalist model can address the limitations discussed.

Clarification of Conceptualization and Measurement

First, the confounded nature of students' subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation and their subsequent commitment to an institution must be clarified. This is not the case with students' initial commitments. Students' initial commitment to the goal of graduation and initial commitment to an institution should be treated as separate elements within Tinto's model. After all, these two initial commitments function as separate concepts to students before they attend an institution. However, once students attend a college or university they cannot be committed to their institution without the goal to eventually graduate from that institution. Both commitments are then inherently connected. In other words, once a student attends an institution, the two commitments no longer function separately.
There seems to be some confusion within college student departure literature as students’ subsequent commitment is thought of as two separate constructs, but not always measured as so. For example, Beil, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan (1999) found that students’ integration into both the academic and social communities led to a greater nondistinguished commitment to their institution, which led to higher student retention. The investigators described their failure to separate students’ subsequent commitments as a limitation within their study. However, another way of interpreting this finding is not as a limitation, but as a more accurate reflection of reality. Students’ subsequent commitment to their institution and subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation are intertwined; they are not two separate subsequent commitments. Thus, a more accurate portrayal of students’ subsequent commitment is: students’ subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from a particular institution. The word subsequent is included within this clarified conceptualization to refer to the commitment that develops after the student interacts with the institution, in line with Tinto’s (1993) original term for the variable.

A second step for clearer conceptualization of the construct of students’ commitment is to define commitment. This can best be accomplished by looking to literature within the field of relational communication. From a relational perspective, commitment is a subjective state, including both cognitive and emotional components (Kulp, 2001) of dedication and constraint (e.g., Johnson, 1991; Lund, 1985; Rusbult, 1983; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Dedication refers to one’s desire to continue a relationship while constraint refers to those aspects that deter one from leaving the
relationship. Commitment, then, includes feeling dedicated to continuing a relationship while deterring oneself from pursuing alternatives to that relationship.

From a relational perspective, commitment has been defined as the extent to which the partners either accept their relationship as continuing indefinitely or direct their behavior toward ensuring its continuance or optimizing its properties (Hinde, 1981). This definition can be applied to students' subsequent commitment. Students' subsequent commitment to an institution will be thought of, then, as the extent to which students accept attending an institution until graduation or direct their behavior toward ensuring their continuance at an institution. This portrayal has three distinct implications for the study of the communication of commitment (cf. Kulp, 2001). First, it demonstrates that students' experience of commitment is concurrently linked to their expression of commitment. Second, because commitment operates within a student-institution relationship, the presence or absence of communication between both parties has the ability to clarify, repair, or exacerbate students' commitment experiences. Third, although it is the perception of a partner's commitment that may affect the quality of a relationship, such perceptions are rooted in real or imaginary social interaction. The implications for this portrayal show that the experience and expression of commitment is an interpersonal process that has ramifications for the quality of the student-institution relationship.

Institution's Commitment to Students

In the past, Tinto (1993) only recognized the commitment that students have for their institutions. However, institutions' commitment to students needs to be examined as well because two parties, students and institutions, interact in a student-institution
relationship. At first consideration, one may find difficulty in accepting the existence of a student-institution relationship, or moreover the involvement of the institution in this relationship. But, the messages between students and institutions provide evidence supporting the existence of a student-institution relationship. Moreover, the messages from institutions to students illustrate the involvement of the institution within this relationship, as well as the communication of commitment by institutions to their students. For example, consider the messages that well known universities send to their prospective students: (a) “we - as a community and an institution - continue to strive to further and strengthen our commitment to students” (Yale University), (b) “As members of the larger Columbia family - students, faculty, administrators, parents, family members, and alumni - we all have a vested interest in what constitutes our community” (Columbia University), or (c) “Our institution's commitment and responsibility is ultimately to students” (University of Hawaii). Institutions also communicate this notion of a meaningful and lasting relationship to continuing students. Universities recognize the importance of being stakeholders in creating and sustaining relationships with students, especially with the looming need for future alumni support (Schuh, 2005). The transactional nature of communication between institutions and students supports the existence of a student-institution relationship, where both parties' commitment should be recognized.

If a student-institution relationship exists, both parties' commitment should be acknowledged and investigated. Specifically, when trying to understand college student departure, an institution’s commitment to students should be incorporated into the interactional model of student persistence (Tinto, 1993). Although Tinto (1993) did
not acknowledge an institution’s commitment to students, he did point out that institutional characteristics contribute to student retention because an institution’s resources place limits on student development and integration. Investigating an institution’s commitment is strongly supported from a relational communication perspective. A fundamental tenet of relational communication is that the communication of commitment is transactional between relational partners; commitment operates in relationships interdependently (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). Both parties in a relationship communicate commitment to one another, and the perception of one another’s commitment in turn affects each party’s commitment. Therefore, researchers should investigate both students’ commitment to the goal of graduation at their institution and an institution’s commitment to the goal of graduating its students.

To investigate institutions’ commitment, researchers need to examine students’ perceptions of commitment. An institution’s commitment to students must be defined in terms of students’ perceptions of that commitment, as researchers are interested in students’ persistence decisions. An institutions’ commitment to its students is a function of those student’s perception of that commitment. Research has shown that an individual’s commitment is affected by perceptions of their partner’s commitment (e.g., Stanley and Markman, 1992), making it worthwhile to investigate institutions’ commitment from a student perspective. Kulp (2001) stressed that perception plays a key role in the assessment of commitment as individuals who notice that their partner avoids discussing a joint future are likely to feel less committed themselves. Examining students’ perceptions of commitment then, is central to the study of college student departure because these perceptions are what could ultimately affect the persistence
decisions of students. Therefore, investigating students' perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them is worthwhile for understanding the construct of commitment within college student departure research.

Subsequent Commitment and Persistence

There is sizable agreement from the field of college student departure research and the discipline of relational communication that commitment is related to persistence. Many studies within college student departure research have found that students' subsequent institutional commitment (Tinto, 1993) has been associated with persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton, Brier, & Hossler, 1988; Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1988; Brower, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997). Recall, the term 'subsequent institutional commitment' is the commitment that develops after the student interacts with the institution. Likewise, within the field of relational communication the construct of commitment has consistently described factors that lead one to continue a relationship. Arriaga and Agnew (2001) described a committed couple member to be a person who has a strong personal intention to continue the relationship, feels attached to the partner, feels morally obligated to continue the relationship, imagines a long term future with the partner, puts primacy of the relationship above other life priorities, and has overcome challenges to the relationship. In the same study that sought to explain the components of commitment, Arriaga and Agnew (2001) reported that in two longitudinal studies individuals in well functioning relationships exhibited greater psychological attachment, stronger long term orientation, and greater intentions to persist in the relationship. Moreover, committed individuals have been described as needing their relationship, as being connected to their
partner, and perceiving the relationship as long-term (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Because of this commitment to the relationship, individuals are more likely to remain in their relationship and work toward maintaining it (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Considering the findings from both disciplines, commitment is strongly expected to be related to persistence. Recognizing student’s subsequent commitment as being to the goal of graduating from an institution, the following hypothesis is offered:

H1a: Students who persist will have stronger subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation at their institution than students who do not persist.

The relationship between students and institutions also merits investigating students’ perceptions of an institution’s commitment to them. Accounting for students’ perceptions of an institution’s subsequent commitment to them is an important step for theoretical elaboration of Tinto’s (1993) interactionalist model of student persistence. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) have even suggested revising Tinto’s model (1993) to include examining institutions’ commitment to students. More specifically, the researchers argued that “commitment of the institution to student welfare” (p. 22) was one of five ignored constructs leading to social integration within the model. Although the addition of this construct to Tinto’s model is necessary, describing it as a construct leading to social integration is problematic. An institution’s commitment to students is actually a subsequent commitment, because it is formed after students and institutions have interacted. Additionally, even though an institution’s commitment to graduating its students has been ignored, present college student departure research can be interpreted such that institutions may already be communicating commitment to students.
As previously noted, institutions have implemented programs for over 35 years that have aimed to increase the retention of their students (Berger & Lyon, 2005). The success of these programs may be because they affect students’ perceptions of the commitment that institutions have for them. For example, for two years Waldron and Yungbluth (2007) tracked groups of students to compare those students who were part of a learning community and those who were not. Those students who were part of a learning community had significantly higher retention rates than those who were not in a learning community. The investigators attributed this finding to the design of the learning community to promote opportunities for communication between students, faculty, and support staff. Another way of explaining these results is to look at how perceptions of commitment might have been affected. The higher retention of those students in a learning community can be credited to students’ increased perception of commitment from the institution. The design of the learning community did not only foster communication of students and staff, but may have been interpreted by students as a sign of an institution’s commitment to them.

Similarly, in another study, students who were exposed to active learning practices in the classroom (e.g., cooperative learning, discussions, and debates) persisted significantly more than those students who did not (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). From this finding, the investigators concluded that faculty teaching roles facilitated persistence. But, this finding can also be interpreted differently, such that those students who were subject to active learning strategies had increased perceptions of their institution’s commitment to them. These two studies provide evidence that increased
student perceptions of commitment from their institution may be associated with student persistence. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1b: Students who persist will perceive their institution's commitment to graduate them to be stronger than students who do not persist.

A Relational Framework for Understanding Commitment

A lack of framework exists within the interactionalist model (Tinto, 1993) to explain what affects changes in students' subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from an institution. With the exception of social integration, no research has identified a consistent variety of factors that appear to be important in affecting students' commitment to their institution. One framework that can be borrowed from relational communication to theoretically elaborate on the construct of commitment within college student departure is Rusbult's investment model (1980, 1983). The investment model was developed as a way to predict commitment and persistence in voluntary relationships, making it logical to apply the model as a framework for elaborating on commitment within the student-institution relationship. The core factor of the investment model as explained by Rusbult (1980, 1983) is commitment. The investment model is theoretically rooted in interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Simply put, the interdependence theory evaluates the rewards and costs an individual perceives in his or her relationship. Interdependence theory suggests that if the outcomes received in a current relationship are better then what an individual perceives they will receive in an alternate relationship, than the individual will be more dependent and committed to the current relationship (see Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The assumption
of the interdependence theory is that individuals are looking to maximize their rewards while seeking to minimize their costs (Rusbult, 1980). This makes sense, as a relationship that experiences more positive rewards should be more satisfying for those individuals (Rusbult et al., 1994). Moreover, the interdependence theory highlights the distinction between satisfaction and dependence. Level of satisfaction is described as an individual’s emotions felt when the relationship either meets or does not meet their needs. For example, when individuals feel their needs have been met by their partners, they may experience happiness because they are satisfied. Dependence is described as the reliance an individual has on that relationship in which to fulfill primary needs (Rusbult et al., 1994). For instance, an individual may continuously turn to a partner, and only that partner, for social support.

In her extension of interdependence theory, Rusbul's investment model illustrated that partners’ state of dependence on one another were represented by feelings of commitment. Commitment is essential for understanding why individuals decide to remain in a relationship. Using the investment model is advantageous in the current examination because of its ability to shed light and elaborate on students’ subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from an institution and students’ perception of an institution’s commitment to graduate them.

The investment model (Rusbult 1980, 1983) provides a theoretical framework to explain the development or deterioration of commitment by addressing three predictors of commitment. These three predictors, the investment size, quality of alternatives and satisfaction level are referred to as the three bases of commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Proponents of the investment model predicted that commitment will be
stronger with higher satisfaction, lower quality of alternatives, and higher investment size. The three bases predict how committed an individual will be in their relationship and this commitment level, in turn, predicts if the individual will stay or leave the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1994). These predictors have consistently shown empirical support for predicting commitment (Rusbult 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). According to a meta-analysis of the investment model, these three bases account for almost two-thirds of the variance in commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003). To continue, a discussion of each predictor will be presented.

\textit{Satisfaction}

The level of satisfaction refers to an affective response connected to the accrual of rewarding experiences in relationships, considering the balance of rewards and costs. As outlined by the investment model, if people experienced more costs than rewards they will be dissatisfied in their relationship; however, if an individual experienced more rewards than costs, they will feel satisfied. The investment model describes that highly satisfied individuals have greater commitment to their partner, and will be more likely to stay in their relationship (Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Past findings have demonstrated that feelings of commitment and the probability of relational persistence are enhanced to the degree that obtained outcomes are desirable and satisfaction level is high (Drigotas, Safstrom & Genitilia, 1999; Lund, 1985; Rusbult et al., 1994).

Within college student departure research the study of student satisfaction has emerged as a new variable of interest (Li, McCoy, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005). Pritchard and Wilson (2003) concluded that satisfaction derived from social involvement was related to persistence. Bean (2005) also noted that student satisfaction is derived from
social engagement (e.g., "fitting in"), and that student satisfaction leads to persistence. These conclusions can be recast in terms of students’ commitment. Students’ degree of satisfaction with their institution may have a pronounced effect on their commitment. More specifically, as students’ satisfaction with their institution increases, their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation at their institution will increase too.

Moreover, students’ perception of satisfaction from their institution may affect their perceptions of their institution’s commitment to them. Studies that can shed some light on these occurrences have examined students’ academic abilities. The central task of an institution is academic achievement, and according to Bean (2005), it is in that area that students’ perceive whether their institution is satisfied with their performance. Academic performance has the ability to significantly affect the extent to which students feel their institution is satisfied with them. Students’ perceived level of satisfaction from their institution is likely to positively affect students’ perception of the institution’s commitment to the goal of graduating them. Moreover, Tinto (1975) described that students who did well academically persisted more than those who did not. Those students who perceive their institution to be satisfied with their performance may be persisting because of their belief that their institution is committed to their goal of graduation. It appears that students’ perception of satisfaction from their institution will have a positive relation to their perceptions of their institution’s commitment to them. Due to the rationale discussed, the following hypotheses are posited:

H2a: As students’ level of satisfaction increases, their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution will increase.
H2b: As students' perceived level of satisfaction from their institution increases, students' perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them will increase.

Quality of Alternatives

As described by the investment model, the quality of alternatives is assessed when an individual compares the outcomes received by his or her partner to the outcome they would expect to get from another potential partner. Commitment is low when desirable alternatives are perceived to be readily available. Conversely, individuals become increasingly committed to their relationships when the quality of alternatives is low. Research findings within relational communication literature support the claim that commitment in romantic relationships is influenced by perceived quality of alternatives (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Simpson, 1987).

Students may become committed to the goal of graduating from their institution depending on the quality of alternatives available to them. Student alternatives to the goal of graduating from their institution can include, for example, career opportunities, family obligations, or transferring to another institution. The option to transfer to an alternate attractive institution may be the most salient alternative that students consider. In today's culture where institutions compete for their students, individuals are able to carefully select which college they will attend. This means that students have options available to them upon choosing an institution to attend, even if they are already enrolled at an institution.

If students perceive that transferring to a desirable alternative institution is a readily available option to them, their commitment can be expected to be negatively
affected. A review of research by Cabrera, Burkum, and La Nasa (2005) which examined findings within college student departure literature on student persistence for the time period following students’ first year substantiates this claim. The researchers concluded that 40% of highly prepared college degree seekers (e.g., secured appropriate academic resources prior to enrollment, high degree aspirations) transferred from a four year institution to another, whereas only 12% of those who were not prepared transferred between four year institutions. One way to interpret this finding is in terms of these students’ perceived quality of alternatives. Those students who were prepared had a higher quality level for alternatives, leading to lower subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution. If students perceive they have few or no alternative institutions available to transfer to, their commitment to graduating from their institution would likely increase. Unfortunately, there is a lack of college student departure research that has explicitly examined the phenomenon of transfer between four year institutions. Still, the alternative for students to transfer demonstrates that as students’ quality of alternatives increases, students’ commitment to the goal of graduation decreases.

There are also other alternatives available to students while they are working toward earning their bachelor’s degree. For example, students may consider the option to leave their institution to enter into their career field before graduating. For some students, the alternative to leave their institution for a career is motivated by the income associated with a job. Students have to ask themselves if ‘making more money now’ is a better alternative than the option of ‘climbing the corporate ladder’ after graduation. This scenario can be interpreted in terms of students’ commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution. Those students who perceive the option to leave as an appealing
alternative to attending their institution will suffer lower commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution. Many students do not consider this option as a quality alternative because attending college is considered a gateway to future career success (Reason, 2003). These scenarios illustrate that as students’ quality of alternatives decreases, their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution will increase.

Likewise, students’ perceptions of their institution’s quality of alternatives may affect their perceptions of commitment from their institution. No research to date has investigated quality of alternatives from this perspective. But, there are at least two reasonable situations where students could perceive their institution to have quality alternatives to them — including other students and other objectives. The foremost circumstance where students’ may perceive their institution as having alternatives to them is when an institution focuses on other students. For example, if an institution heavily directs attention to recruiting students, rather than supporting students already in attendance, this could be interpreted as the institution having quality alternatives. If an institution concentrates on programs and initiatives that bring students in to the institution without offering support of their success after arrival, these students may perceive that the institution is concerned with the bottom line rather than student success. This latter description begins to demonstrate the second situation in which students may perceive their institutions as having alternatives to them.

When an institution has an extensive focus on objectives to fulfilling its mission other than students, students may perceive this to be a quality alternative. In cases where institutional efforts toward goals such as increasing revenue, conducting research, or
bolstering athletic programs are not matched with increased infrastructure of student support systems (e.g., student services and academic support) — students may feel their institution to having a quality level of alternatives. Although it may be the case that students generally understand that they are one of many interests for their institution, if students feel they are not an obvious priority among other objectives they will feel that the institution is less committed to the goal of graduating them. These examples illustrate that students’ perceptions of commitment from their institution is negatively affected by their perception of their institutions’ having quality alternatives to students. Due to the rationale discussed, the following hypotheses are posited:

H3a: As students’ quality of alternatives decreases, students’ subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution will increase.

H3b: As students’ perceptions of their institution’s quality of alternatives decreases, students’ perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them will increase.

*Investment Size*

Rusbult (1980) extended the investment model beyond interdependence theory by adding the predictor of investment size. By including this factor, Rusbult suggested that commitment may be increased not just by satisfaction or poor alternatives, but also by the amount of investment contributed to a relationship. Investment size refers to the extrinsic and intrinsic resources an individual puts into a relationship and although the individual may not be repaid immediately, he or she may expect return on the investment later in the relationship (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Extrinsic resources are extraneous resources that become important to the relationship, such as mutual friends. Intrinsic
resources are put into the relationship by couple members, such as time, money, or emotional effort (Rusbult, 1983). Individuals who invest more resources into a relationship become more committed and find it difficult to leave the relationship. Findings have shown that commitment increases due to investments because they intensify the costs of ending a relationship, in that leaving would mean abandoning cumulative investments (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994).

Research has also shown that commitment and relationship persistence are enhanced by the investment of resources in a relationship (Lund, 1985; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1991).

Similar to these findings within relational communication research, students have been found to have higher commitment toward their institutions due to several types of investments. Bean and Eaton (2000) described that the amount of emotional or psychological effort students had placed into their relationship with their institution was positively related to students' commitment for their institution. Schuh (2005) brought attention to an important point regarding students' monetary investment, “Financing higher education has become a complex, high-stakes activity for students and their institutions. Many students, in effect, are betting their economic future on their college experience” (p. 277). The finances that students invest into institutions for their education may drastically increase their commitment to graduate from that institution.

Another very salient investment that students put into their institution is time. The length of time that students spend at an institution has the ability to strongly affect their commitment to that institution. As students study at one institution for a longer period of time they have likely paid more tuition money, become more socially and academically
integrated, and have been satisfied with their experience at the institution. These examples of students’ investment demonstrate that as students’ investment size increases, so does their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution.

Conversely, students’ perceptions of an institution’s investment in them will increase their perception of commitment from the institution. For example, institutions that provide their students with freebies (e.g., sweaters, pens) or supplies (e.g., college-issued computers) may communicate more investment to students. Additionally, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) argued that students perceive investment from their institution in the activities and programs that are made available to students. Examples of these programs are clubs, study halls, late night activities, and academic cohort programs. The greater that students’ perceive their institution has invested toward their success, the more they perceive that the institution is committed to the goal of graduating them. Due to this reasoning, the following hypotheses are offered:

H4a: As students’ investment size increases, their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution will increase.

H4b: As students’ perception of their institution’s investment size into students increases, students’ perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them will increase.
CHAPTER 2
METHOD

Sample

Students at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM) were recruited for the purposes of this investigation \(N = 252\). Participants were gathered from two sources, undergraduate speech communication courses \(n = 178, 71\%\) and the Access to College Excellence (ACE) program \(n = 74, 29\%\). These two sources of participants were sampled because they are made up of students ranging from their first year to senior level in college. Students from the undergraduate speech communication courses were generally in their upper classes (sophomore to senior level). Conversely, students in the ACE program were in their first year and were assigned to cohorts of 12-15 students who take two predetermined courses together for a semester. In addition to their regular courses, ACE students attend a weekly seminar that is designed to reflect the specific interests and needs of each ACE cluster.

The age range of the entire sample \(N = 252\) was 17-48 years \((M = 21.26, SD = 3.81)\). In total, 73 freshmen (29\%), 21 sophomores (8\%), 72 juniors (29\%), and 86 seniors (34\%) responded. In order to assess persistence, certain students who lacked the characteristics to be considered a persister or nonpersister were eliminated from the sample. In the present investigation, a persister is someone who completes their prescribed course of study within four years. Students who were enrolled beyond their fourth year and graduating seniors were eliminated from the sample, as these students were not able to be categorized as a persister or nonpersister. Only students best described as ‘continuing non-graduating students’ \(n = 125\) were analyzed in this
sample. Continuing non-graduating students were defined as those who (a) reported themselves as classified full time students, (b) in their freshmen, sophomore, or junior year, and (c) in their first three calendar years of college. Of the continuing non-graduating students, 69 were freshmen (55%), 20 were sophomores (15%), and 37 were juniors (30%).

**Procedures**

All participants were recruited in compliance with the institution’s policies and procedures for the protection of human subjects. Before students registered for their 2008 semester classes, the researcher went to speech communication courses and individual ACE seminars to recruit students to participate in a research project about staying or leaving UHM before graduation. In order to participate, students were asked to complete a survey outside of class, which they were instructed to return to the instructor of the class/period from which they were recruited. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Students were required to return a consent form with their completed questionnaire (see Appendix A). A copy of the information from the consent form was provided to the participants when the survey was distributed. Students from both the speech communication classes and the ACE program received extra credit as an incentive for participating in this study.

**Measures**

*Commitment.* Two constructs of commitment were assessed. The first was a self-report of students’ commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution. The second was students’ perceptions of their institution’s commitment to the goal of graduating them. These two constructs were each measured in two ways. The two
measures were derived from separate sources of literature: relational and educational (see Appendix B). Each construct was intentionally measured separately, to see whether the findings using the measure derived from educational literature were consistent with past educational research of college student departure. Whenever any measure of commitment is referred to within this investigation, the source of the measure (i.e., relational or educational) will be indicated in parentheses after the construct.

Commitment (relational) was measured by adapting Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) global commitment measure. Rusbult et al.’s measure was developed to assess commitment between relational partners and the researchers reported a high reliability for their original seven-item measure ($\alpha = .91$). Other researchers have reported acceptable reliabilities as well, ranging from .75 to .91 (Kulp, 2001; Sprecher, 2001). When adapting the global commitment measure for use in the present investigation, only minor changes had to be made regarding the relational partner. For example, the words “my partner” were changed to “UHM.” Next, commitment (educational) was measured by adapting Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1980) six-item measure of students’ subsequent commitment to their institution. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) reported an acceptable reliability for their original measure ($\alpha = .71$). To adapt Pascarella and Terenzini’s items for use in this investigation, only minor changes were made regarding the participants’ institution. For example, the words “my college or university” were changed to “UHM.”

Students’ commitment (relational) to the goal of graduation from their institution ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.16$) was measured with eight items, as one original item was modified into two separate items. For example, this statement taken from the original commitment measure from the relational literature, “I am committed to maintaining my relationship
with my partner," was modified to, "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with UHM." An acceptable reliability was found for the adapted relational items used in the present investigation ($\alpha = .86$). Students' commitment (educational) to the goal of graduation from their institution ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.27$) was measured by modifying all four original items. To illustrate this modification, original items such as, "It is important for me to graduate from college" were modified for the present investigation to "It is important for me to graduate from UHM." When conducting a reliability analysis of the four items used in the present investigation, one item was eliminated. This elimination improved the reliability estimate, ultimately resulting in a marginal alpha level ($\alpha = .69$). All items adapted from both sources of measurement used 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating stronger student commitment to the goal of graduation.

Students' perception of their institution's commitment (relational) to the goal of graduating them ($M = 4.40, SD = 1.03$) was measured with seven modified items. For example, this statement taken from the original commitment measure from the relational literature, "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner," was modified to "UHM is committed to maintaining its relationship with me." To prompt participants about how to respond to items referring to UHM, the following directions were used: "When thinking about UHM, consider the university as a whole, including your experiences with your professors, offices on campus, other faculty members, and university staff." When conducting a reliability analysis of the seven items used in the present investigation, one item was eliminated. This elimination resulted in an acceptable alpha level for the present investigation ($\alpha = .88$). Students' perception of their
institution's commitment (educational) to the goal of graduating them \( (M = 5.05, SD = 1.31) \) was measured with four modified items. To illustrate this modification, original items such as, "It is important for me to graduate from college" were modified for the present investigation to "It is important to UHM that I graduate." When conducting a reliability analysis of the four items used in the present investigation, one item was eliminated. This ultimately resulted in an acceptable alpha level \( (\alpha = .74) \) in the present investigation. All items adapted from both sources of measurement used 7-point Likert-type scale response categories \( (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) \), with higher scores indicating students having perceptions of stronger commitment from their institution toward the goal of graduating them.

**Persistence.** Students' persistence decision (see Appendix C) was measured as a dichotomous variable. Questions commonly utilized in the college student departure literature were used to measure students' persistence. The question that was ultimately used to categorize continuing non-graduating students as persisters or non-persisters was "Will you register at UHM next fall?" The non-graduating continuing students who indicated their intention to enroll in the next Fall semester at UHM were considered persisters \( (n = 111) \). Therefore, 88% of non-graduating continuing students reported an intention to persist at UHM. Of the 12% of non-graduating continuing students who intended to depart UHM before graduating \( (n = 14) \), 10 were freshmen, 2 were sophomores, and 2 were juniors. The non-persister rate by class standing was: 14% of freshmen did not intend to persist, 10% of sophomores did not intend to persist, and 2% of juniors did not intend to persist. To elaborate about these non-graduating continuing students who intended to depart UHM before graduating \( (n = 14) \), all were full time, 7
were in-state (50%) and 7 were out of state (50%), 3 were male (21.4%) and 11 were female (78.6%).

**Satisfaction, Alternatives, and Investment.** Within relational research, Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) developed the most recent and widely accepted measure for assessing the predictors (satisfaction, alternatives, and investment) of the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Each of the investment model predictors investigated in the present study were measured by adapting items from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) measure. Recall that items had to be adapted in order to account for the student’s self-report of their satisfaction, alternatives, and investment and students’ perceptions of their institution’s satisfaction, alternatives, and investment into them. Recall also that students were instructed to consider UHM as the university as a whole, including experiences with professors, offices on campus, faculty members, and staff. Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) reported consistently high reliabilities for their original measures of satisfaction (α = .92), alternatives (α = .82), and investment (α = .84). All items assessing satisfaction, alternatives, and investment in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting stronger satisfaction, more alternatives, and larger investment.

**Satisfaction.** Students’ satisfaction (M = 4.73, SD = 1.06) was assessed with five adapted items (see Appendix D). To illustrate this adaptation, original items such as, “I feel satisfied with my relationship” was modified for the present investigation to “I feel satisfied with my relationship with UHM.” In the present investigation, an acceptable reliability was found for the adapted five-item measure of students’ satisfaction (α = .89).
Additionally, five adapted items were utilized to measure students' perception of their institution's satisfaction level with them. To illustrate, the same original item of "I feel satisfied with my relationship" was modified to "UHM is satisfied with its relationship with me." In the present investigation, an acceptable reliability was found for this five-item measure (α = .86) of students' perception of their institution's satisfaction level with them (M = 4.32, SD = 1.02).

Quality of alternatives. Students' quality of alternatives (M = 3.30, SD = 1.12) was measured by adapting and combining items from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) measure and a 1999 measure by Beil, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan (see Appendix E). Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) original five-item measure of quality of alternatives was modified into a six-item measure of student's quality of alternatives in the present investigation. To illustrate this adaptation of Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) items, an original item such as "People other than my partner are very appealing" was modified to "Colleges and universities other than UHM are very appealing to me." Four more items were added by adapting four items from Beil, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan's (1999) study which assessed students' transfer and dropout behavior. The original items were integrated here because transferring and dropping out represent very salient alternatives for students. To illustrate the adaptation of Beil, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan's (1999) items, an original item such as "On balance I'd rather be home than here" was modified to "On balance I'd rather be home than at UHM." Beil, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan (1999) reported the reliability coefficient for their original measure to be .69. In the present study, an acceptable reliability was found for the combined nine-item measure of students' quality of alternatives (α = .84).
Additionally, all five original items of Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) measure of quality of alternatives were modified to measure students’ perception of the institution’s quality of alternatives to them. For example, “People other than my partner are very appealing” was modified to “Other students are very appealing to UHM.” In the present investigation, an acceptable reliability was found for this five-item measure (α = .81) of students’ perception of the institution’s quality of alternatives to them (M = 4.88, SD = 0.99).

Investment. Students’ investment size (M = 4.27, SD = 1.38) was measured with five adapted items (see Appendix F). To illustrate this adaptation, an original item such as “I have put a great deal into my relationship” was modified to “I have put a great deal into my relationship with UHM.” In the present investigation, an acceptable reliability was found for the adapted five-item measure of students’ investment size (α = .89). Additionally, five adapted items were used to measure students’ perception of their institution’s investment size. To illustrate, the same original item of “I have put a great deal into my relationship” was modified to “UHM has put a great deal into our relationship.” In the present investigation, an acceptable reliability was found for this five-item measure (α = .92) of students’ perception of their institution’s investment size (M = 4.13, SD = 1.38).

Validity Check. The current study measured students’ perceptions of their institution’s commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and investment toward students. A validity check was conducted to check if students actually considered their institution’s commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and investment toward students. The validity check was conducted using items that measured the degree to which students considered
their institution’s perceptions of them (see appendix G). Specifically, items measured the extent students think about their institution’s commitment to the goal of graduating them (e.g., “To what extent do you think about UHM’s commitment to you?”), satisfaction with them (e.g., “To what extent do you think about UHM’s satisfaction with you?”), alternatives to them (e.g., “To what extent do you think about whether UHM focuses on alternatives (e.g., other students or priorities) to you?”), and investment in them (e.g., “To what extent do you think about whether UHM has invested in you?”). All items were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1 = not at all, 7 = a lot), with higher scores representing a larger extent of consideration.

The validity check showed that students considered their institution’s commitment to the goal of graduating them ($M = 4.07, SD = 1.34$), satisfaction with them ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.38$), alternatives to them ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.29$), and investment in them ($M = 4.04, SD = 1.39$). These results demonstrate that although students may not place a heavy focus on their perception of their institution’s perception of them, they are recognizing their institution’s perception of them.

Demographics. Participants also reported on basic demographic information including age, gender, ethnicity, and cultural background (see Appendix H). Relevant information regarding students’ progress at UHM was asked (e.g., class standing and expected graduation date) as well.
Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were used to test H1. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationships predicted in H2, H3, and H4. In all analyses, recall that students' subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation and students' perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them were assessed with measures derived from separate sources of literature: relational and educational. The results reported present the findings for both measures, as indicated in parentheses (i.e., relational or educational). Also, recall that only continuing non-graduating students (full time; freshmen, sophomores, and juniors; in their first three years) were used in the analysis of each hypothesis. Continuing non-graduating students who indicated their intention to enroll in the next Fall semester at UHM were considered persisters.

**Hypothesis One**

H1a predicted that students who persisted would have stronger subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation at their institution than students who did not persist. Results of the analysis (relational) showed an overall significant effect for persistence, $F(1, 122) = 49.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$. Students' who persisted ($M = 5.19$, $SD = .97$) had significantly higher subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation at their institution than students' who did not persist ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.12$). Moreover, results of the analysis (educational) also showed an overall significant effect for persistence, $F(1, 122) = 16.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. Students' who persisted ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.18$) had significantly higher subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation at
their institution than students' who did not persist \((M = 4.40, SD = 1.30)\). Therefore, H1a was supported as assessed using measures from both sources of literature.

H1b predicted students who persisted would perceive their institution's commitment to graduate them to be stronger than students who did not persist. Results of the analysis (relational) failed to show an overall significant effect for persistence, \(F(1, 122) = .05, p = \text{n.s.}\). Students' who persisted \((M = 4.39, SD = 1.05)\) did not have a significantly higher perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them than students' who did not persist \((M = 4.45, SD = .89)\). However, results of the analysis (educational) showed an overall significant effect for persistence, \(F(1, 122) = 6.52, p < .05\). Students' who persisted \((M = 5.15, SD = 1.21)\) had a significantly higher perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them than students' who did not persist \((M = 4.21, SD = 1.79)\). Therefore, H1b was partially supported.

**Hypothesis Two**

H2a predicted that as students' level of satisfaction increased, their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution would increase. Results revealed that students' level of satisfaction was significantly and positively correlated with their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution (relational), \(r (123) = .65, p < .001\). Further, results revealed that students' level of satisfaction was significantly and positively correlated with their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution (educational), \(r (123) = .62, p < .001\). Thus, results were supportive of all the predictions of H2a.

H2b predicted that as students' perception of their institution's level of satisfaction with them increased, students' perception of their institution's commitment to
Hypothesis Two

H2a predicted that as students’ perception of their institution’s level of satisfaction with them increased, students’ perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them (relational) would also increase. Results revealed that students’ perception of their institution’s level of satisfaction with them was significantly and positively correlated with their perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them (relational), \( r(123) = .65, p < .001 \). Further, results revealed that students’ perception of their institution’s level of satisfaction with them was significantly and positively correlated with their perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them (educational), \( r(123) = .62, p < .001 \). Thus, results were supportive of all the predictions of H2b.

Hypothesis Three

H3a predicted that as students’ quality of alternatives decreased, students’ subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution would increase. Results revealed that students’ quality of alternatives was significantly and negatively correlated with their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution (relational), \( r(122) = -.63, p < .001 \). Further, results revealed that students’ quality of alternatives was significantly and negatively correlated with their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution (educational), \( r(123) = -.53, p < .001 \). Thus, results were supportive of all the predictions of H3a.

H3b predicted that as students’ perceptions of their institution’s quality of alternatives decreased, their perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them would increase. Results revealed that students’ perceptions of their institution’s quality of alternatives was not significantly negatively correlated with their perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them (relational), \( r(123) = -.02, p = .42 \). Further, results revealed that students’ perception of their institution’s quality of alternatives was not significantly negatively correlated with their perception of their
institution’s commitment to graduate them (educational), $r (123) = -.08, p = .20$. Thus, results were not supportive of the predictions of H3b.

**Hypothesis Four**

H4a predicted that as students’ investment size increased, their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution would increase. Results revealed that students’ investment size was significantly and positively correlated with their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution (relational), $r (123) = .47, p < .001$. Further, results revealed that students’ investment size was significantly and positively correlated with their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution (educational), $r (123) = .35, p < .001$. Thus, results were supportive of all the predictions of H4a.

H4b predicted that as students’ perception of their institution’s investment size into students increased, students’ perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them would increase. Results revealed that students’ perceptions of their institution’s investment size from their institution was significantly and positively correlated with their perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them (relational), $r (123) = .53, p < .001$. Further, results revealed that students’ perceived investment size from their institution was significantly and positively correlated with their perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them (educational), $r (123) = .43, p < .001$. Thus, results were supportive of all the predictions of H4b.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this investigation was to theoretically extend Tinto’s model of student persistence (1993) by drawing on relational communication research to elaborate on the role of commitment in student persistence. To accomplish this, college student departure literature was reviewed with focus on a critique of the conceptualization and measurement of commitment within the interactionalist model of student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

In the present study, the construct of commitment within Tinto’s model was looked at in a different way. To provide clarity to the measure of commitment, commitment was conceptualized as students’ subsequent commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution. Assessing commitment from this perspective was important because it assessed the actual behavior researchers (and administrators) want to understand and predict. Recall, the word ‘subsequent’ refers to the commitment developed by the student after interacting with the institution, which was measured here in a cross-sectional design. Additionally, in the present study, the ability of an institution to communicate to students was taken into account by considering the commitment that students’ perceived from their institution. Moreover, the present study examined the development and deterioration of commitment between students’ and institutions from an investment model framework. The investment model (Rusbult, 1983) took into consideration students’ satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment into the institution as well as students’ perceptions of their institution’s satisfaction, alternatives, and investment into them. Several predictions were investigated as commitment was
examined from these new perspectives. Findings indicated that students who persisted had stronger subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation at their institution and stronger perceptions of their institution's commitment to graduating them than students who did not persist. Moreover, as students' level of satisfaction increased, quality of alternatives decreased, and investment size increased their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution increased. Also, as students' perceptions of their institution's level of satisfaction with them increased and perceptions of their institution's investment size into them increased their perception of their institution's commitment to graduating them increased. The correlations found in the present study show that relationships exist, but whether these relationships are causal should be determined in future work.

*Students' Persistence*

As mentioned, findings from the present investigation showed that students who persisted had stronger subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation at their institution than students who did not persist. This finding is in line with the considerable agreement of college student departure and relational communication literature that students' commitment is related to persistence. Further, this differentiation betweenpersisters' and non-persisters' subsequent commitment lends support to the ability of Tinto's model to assess persistence. But, the commitment measured here was different than Tinto's original conceptualization of commitment. Recall the argument that once students attend a college or university they cannot be committed to their institution without the goal to eventually graduate from that institution. Because of this premise, commitment was measured here as one construct, as students' subsequent commitment to
the goal of graduating from their institution. Future studies should compare the conceptualization and measure of students' subsequent commitment in the present investigation to Tinto's original conceptualization and measurement of commitment.

Mixed findings were reported when students' perceptions of institutional commitment were investigated. When a measure of commitment was taken from relational literature and slightly adapted to assess students' perceptions of the institution's commitment, students who persisted and students who did not persist did not differ in their perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them. However, when a measure taken from education literature was slightly adapted to assess students' perceptions, persisters and non-persisters significantly differed in their perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them. These mixed findings should not be interpreted such that students do not perceive commitment from their institutions. In fact, in the present investigation, students' reported that they did consider and think about their institution's commitment to them.

Rather, this finding may be explained by a number of possible explanations. First, the relationship between students' perception of their institution's commitment to graduate them and their persistence may be more complicated than originally thought. Second, it may be the case that the construct of institution's commitment to students is better described more globally as a general commitment to students, rather than a commitment to the goal of graduating students. For example, educational researchers Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) have suggested revising Tinto's model (1993) to include examining colleges and universities commitment to student welfare, communal potential, and institutional integrity. Forces such as these may have an indirect effect on
students' perceptions of their institution's overall commitment to them. Future research should seek to investigate the specific institutional qualities that students' consider to be indicators of their institution's commitment to them.

*The Investment Model in Higher Education*

The present investigation examined commitment from an investment model approach (Rusbult, 1983) in an effort to provide a framework that explained the development and deterioration of commitment for students and for students' perception of their institution. The investment model took into consideration students' satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment into the institution to explain students' commitment. Results indicated that as students' level of satisfaction increased, students' quality of alternatives decreased, and as students' investment size increased their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from their institution increased. Moreover, the investment model was also utilized to investigate students' perceptions of their institution's satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment into students. Correlational findings showed that as students' perception of their institution's satisfaction increased and perception of their institution's investment size increased their perception of their institution's commitment to the goal of graduating them increased. This trend in support of all but one prediction guided by the investment model provides support for examining the commitment between students and institutions with the investment model in higher education may be useful. Considering satisfaction, alternatives, and investment may be practical for researchers who investigate commitment between students and institutions in the future. Furthermore, considering these predictors of commitment may be especially rewarding for college and university
administrators who seek to understand students’ commitment as well as students’ perceptions of their institution’s commitment.

Still, one prediction that was put forth in line with the investment model was not supported. It was expected that as students’ perception of their institution’s quality of alternatives decreased, their perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them would increase, but this was not supported. At first consideration, one might explain this finding by assuming that students simply do not perceive that an institution can have quality alternatives to them. But, students reported that they considered and thought about their institution’s focus on alternatives to them, such as other students or university priorities. One explanation that may account for this finding is that the measure of perceived alternatives did not prompt students to consider the things that they truly perceive the institution to focus on as alternatives to them. If this is the case, further qualitative research should be conducted to assess which alternatives students’ feel an institution has to them. For example, focus groups might be held to investigate the language that students use to describe alternatives that their institution has to them or the process by which students perceive or come to understand that their institution has alternatives to students.

The trend in support of every other prediction guided by the investment model leads to several conclusions. First, measuring students’ and institutions’ satisfaction, alternatives, and investment may be useful, and perhaps considered, when assessing commitment in the study of college student departure. Also, measuring these predictors to understand commitment is parsimonious while taking into account both parties in the student-institution relationship. Second, the relationship between students’ satisfaction,
quality of alternatives, and investment into their institution and their subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation deserves further inquiry. As mentioned, the correlations found in the present study show that relationships exist, but whether these relationships are causal should be determined in future work. Still, universities and colleges should acknowledge the covariance between these predictors and students' commitment, especially as persisters and non-persisters differ in their subsequent commitment. Third, universities should act upon the finding that students' perceptions of their institutions' satisfaction with and investment into students is associated with their perception of their institution's commitment to students.

The investment model was utilized in the present work to examine two constructs of commitment. First, students' reported commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution was investigated. Second, students' perception of their institution's commitment to the goal of graduating them was explored. Similar findings were reported regarding the commitment studied from both viewpoints, one of the student and the other of the students' perception of the institution. Satisfaction, alternatives, and investment were utilized to understand the development and deterioration of students' commitment and students' perceptions of their institution's commitment. These findings lead to some important questions concerning whether the predictions of each model work in conjunction with one another. To demonstrate, the first question that future research could address is whether students' commitment and students' perceptions of their institution's commitment are positively associated. Investigators should expect that the two will be associated, as a principle of relational communication is that the communication of commitment is transactional between partners; commitment operates
in relationships interdependently (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). Therefore, as both parties in a relationship communicate commitment to one another, these perceptions of one another’s commitment in turn affect each party’s commitment.

The second question for future research is whether students’ perceptions of their institutions’ satisfaction, alternatives, and investment are related to students’ own commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution. Two reasons illustrate the importance of addressing this question. First, persisters are more committed than non-persisters, and second, students’ commitment is the outcome variable that researchers want to address and impact. If it is the case that students’ perceptions of their institutions’ satisfaction, alternatives, and investment is related to students’ commitment, then implications arise for institutions to increase students’ perceptions of their institution’s satisfaction, alternatives, and investment into students.

Institutional Implications. One tenet of this investigation that is based on relational communication literature is that both parties in a relationship communicate commitment to one another. Although this is accepted without question when assessing interpersonal relationships, this assumption had yet to be applied to the relationship between students and institutions. Therefore, students’ commitment and students’ perception of their institution’s commitment to graduate them was examined here, in order to fully understand the construct of commitment within college student persistence decisions and within college student departure research. But, how might colleges and universities utilize these findings for organizational reform? In what ways can institutions benefit from the results of this investigation? The answer is quite simple. Colleges and universities need to acknowledge their role in the communication of
commitment within the student-institution relationship. Institutions should realize that they are communicating commitment to students, and their potential ability to increase students’ commitment. Institutions may find it beneficial to strategize ways to increase students’ perceptions of their institution’s satisfaction and investment with students and reduce students’ perceptions of their institution’s quality of alternatives; as well as promote students’ satisfaction and investment with the institution while discouraging students’ alternatives.

Institutional implications for satisfaction. When communicating with students, institutions should place an importance on making students feel like their institution is satisfied with them. One area where institutions may emphasize a sense of satisfaction with students is to reward them for their academic abilities, as a central task of any university is student academic achievement. On the other hand, when students falter academically (e.g., receive low grades), institutions could strive to have programs (e.g., “safety-nets”) in place that assist students to better their performance in the classroom. If institutions have programs such as tutoring or mandatory counseling in place, perhaps students’ will perceive that their institution is willing to assist them rather than becoming dissatisfied with them. This recommendation is in line with Tinto’s (1975) original research findings which described that students who did well academically persisted more than those who did not. This finding may be reinterpreted such that those students who persisted had stronger perceptions of their institution’s commitment to them, which were impacted by students’ perception of their institution’s satisfaction with them.

Beyond developing students’ perceptions of satisfaction from the institution, institutions should also emphasize increasing students’ satisfaction with the institution.
As discussed earlier, satisfaction is an affective response connected to the accrual of rewarding experiences in relationships, considering the balance of rewards and costs. Stated most simply, if students experience more rewards than costs in their relationship, they will feel satisfied. Recently, Maguad (2007) suggested that students should be viewed as customers of higher education, and therefore institutions should be committed to satisfying and anticipating their customer needs. This perspective challenges the historic, traditional academic role of institutions, but has important implications regarding satisfaction. Although suggesting the term 'customer' may arouse misconceptions, Maguad stressed that customer-driven organizations are effective because they are committed to satisfying and anticipating customer needs. The findings of the present work do not suggest that students should be referred to as customers, but institutions may benefit greatly from constant evaluation of how they can best serve students in an attempt to satisfy their needs, and in turn, develop commitment.

Institutional implications for alternatives. Alternatives may be an important area for institutions to consider. Even with the limited scope of the present study, questions arise as to the availability of student alternatives within higher education and what colleges and universities should do in light of these alternatives. Clarifying the elements that students perceive to be institutional alternatives to students is an important first step for future work in this area. Nonetheless, when communicating with students, institutions should take into account that students certainly have alternatives. Perhaps the most salient alternative for students is their ability to transfer to another desirable college or university. In today’s competitive college market, transferring is a readily available option to students. Another alternative for students is to take time off for personal or
career options other than attending school. As found in the present study, students’ quality of alternatives is negatively associated with their commitment to the goal of graduating from their institution. The implication of students having alternatives brings attention to a larger matter within the field of student departure regarding the conceptualization of retention. Alternatives may be somewhat complicated for institutions to consider when communicating with students because the institution must first decide how they conceptualize retention. For example, institutions might have to reflect on whether they want to encourage students to transfer to more prestigious institutions, or if they want to cast themselves as one-stop destinations for students. In a similar manner, administrators may find themselves considering whether student stop-out for career advancement makes them a non-persister. These questions demonstrate that institutions must each reflect on their own definition of retention based on their institutional goals before choosing strategic ways to communicate with students. Overall, institutions may find it difficult to reduce students’ availability of alternatives, but perhaps they can lower the quality of those alternatives by making students want to stay enrolled because of their satisfaction and investment.

Institutional implications for investment. Just as students have been found to have higher commitment toward their institutions due to several types of investments, institutions can find ways to make students perceive a sense of investment from the institution. Past research has shown that the investments which students put into their relationship with the institution include money, time, and effort. Bean and Eaton (2000) found that the amount of emotional or psychological effort students placed into their relationship with their institution was positively related to students’ commitment for their
Institutions should strive to increase students’ perceptions of these same investments from the institution.

Institutions may be able to do a number of things to increase students’ perceptions of an institution’s investment in them. To increase students’ perceptions of institution’s monetary investment into students, institutions can provide their students with freebies (e.g., sweaters, pens) or supplies (e.g., college-issued computers). Additionally, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) argued that students perceive investment from their institution in the activities and programs that are made available to students. Examples of these programs are clubs, study halls, late night activities, and academic cohort programs. Perhaps programs such as these foster student perceptions of their institution’s investment in them around the clock. Programs such as these likely exist on college campuses, so increasing students’ perception of their institution investing time into them may be more of a publicity campaign then a campaign for new services. Institutions should also strive to develop students’ perceptions of the institution’s invested effort into students. Institutions should continually assess what they can do to make students within their population feel like the institution cares about them. After all, the greater that students’ perceive their institution has invested toward their success, the more they perceive that the institution is committed to the goal of graduating them.

Directions for Future Research

The present investigation has several distinct limitation that warrant discussion, as well as other avenues for future research. First, the sampling of the current investigation should be scrutinized. Although the sample size for the study was powerful enough to detect statistical significance, a larger group of non-persisters is needed to produce more
generalizable findings. A lack of non-persisters here may be due to the recruitment done in ACE cohorts. Although ACE represented an available sample of first year students, these students may have been much less likely to dropout because of their involvement in such a program. Another sampling limitation experienced is that students’ reports were measured near the end of the semester in a cross-sectional data collection. Students’ commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and investment may vary depending on whether the measurements were taken at the beginning, middle, or end of the semester. Thus, longitudinal data should be collected at multiple points in the semester, and researchers should strive to follow up with participants regarding their persistence decisions. Using sampling techniques such as these will also allow future researchers to ensure time ordering within the variables of interest, in an attempt to determine causality.

Second, persistence was measured in the present investigation as a categorical variable. Further, the item which measured persistence only asked of a behavioral intention, as opposed to the actual behavior. These measurement decisions made by the researcher in the present investigation provide future researchers with several recommendations for future work. To begin, persistence should be measured in other ways, especially as a continuous variable. By measuring persistence in this way, correlational and regresional analyses could be conducted. Next, researchers could assess actual persistence behavior by collaborating with colleges and universities to have access to students’ official institutional records. In doing so, researchers will be able to assess a perfectly accurate measure of persistence.

Third, qualitative research methodologies are needed to explain the unexpected findings within the current investigation. Recall that the validity check conducted here
showed that students considered their institution’s commitment to the goal of graduating them, satisfaction with them, alternatives to them, and investment in them. Students are recognizing and considering their institution’s perception of them. Studies should seek to investigate the specific institutional qualities that students’ consider to be indicators of their institution’s commitment to the goal of graduating them, satisfaction with them, alternatives to them, and investment in them. This is especially important in regard to perceptions of commitment and perceptions of institution’s quality of alternatives.

Fourth, the construct of commitment can be further elaborated to understand students’ persistence decisions. Using the investment model to understand students’ and institutions’ commitment is one of many potential sources of theoretical elaboration that can be derived from relational communication literature. Relational communication researchers not only argue that the construct of commitment has many implications for relationships and not only arises from different sources, but comes in many forms based on the nature of the relationship (e.g., Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Although commitment is conceptualized and measured as a unidimensional construct within the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983), others suggest that there are multiple dimensions of relationship commitment (e.g., Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). For instance, Johnson’s (1991) tripartite of commitment exemplifies the notion that commitment not only springs from different sources, but comes in different forms. The tripartite is composed of three factors, which include personal commitment (i.e., wanting to stay in the relationship), moral commitment (i.e., feeling morally obliged to stay in the commitment), and structural commitment (i.e., external or internal constraints to leaving the relationship).
Johnson (1991) would suggest that his commitment framework provides a distinction between voluntary and involuntary relationships. Recall that in the current examination, the relationship between student and institution was thought to be voluntary. Future investigations could examine students' perceptions of attending an institution of higher education as an obligation versus a choice.

**Conclusion**

The present investigation sought to elaborate on the role of commitment within college students' persistence decisions. Relational communication research was utilized to explicate the construct of commitment, and in doing so, Tinto's interactionalist model (1993) was investigated in a new way. From the findings it can be concluded that both students' commitment and perceptions of their institution's commitment are relevant in the higher education setting. Furthermore, continuing to acknowledge the relationship that exists between students and institutions will be important for future researchers who continue to elaborate on the development and deterioration of commitment, as well as investigate the effects of commitment on persistence.
APPENDIX A

Agreement to Participate in a Student Experiences Study

Matthew Savage, Primary Investigator, (808) 956-3317

My name is Matthew Savage and I am a graduate student in the Speech Department. This research project is being done in part to fulfill the requirements of earning my Master's Degree. This research project seeks to identify why students stay or leave the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM) before graduating.

Participation in this study will involve the completion of one questionnaire. In the questionnaire, you will be asked to respond to measures assessing how you would feel about attending UHM. You will be one of a minimum of at least 150 students who will participate in this study. The approximate length of time it will take to complete this entire questionnaire is fifteen (15) minutes. You may receive extra credit for your participation. If you choose to not participate in this study, your instructor will have another opportunity for you to earn extra credit.

The investigator believes there is little or no risk to participating in this study. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit as a result of withdrawing from this study.

Participating in this research may be of no benefit to you. However, you may be a part of identifying the feelings that students have toward their universities.

All information in this study will remain confidential. By law, however, agencies such as the UH Committee on Human Studies have the authority to review research data. All records associated with this study will be locked in the investigators' office for the duration of this study. All research records will be destroyed upon the completion of this research project.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the UH Committee on Human Studies at 956-5007, write to 2540 Maile Way, Spalding Hall 253, Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96822, or send an e-mail to uhirb@hawaii.edu.

Should you have any questions regarding this research, please contact Matthew Savage at (808) 956-3317 or you send an e-mail to msavage@hawaii.edu.

I have read and understand the above information, and agree to participate in this research project.

Name (print): ___________________________ Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

The researcher may want to follow-up with you to see if you are still enrolled or have graduated from UHM. If you are willing to be contacted for future data collections, please provide your contact information below. Again, this does not mean you will have to participate later, you will be asked again for your consent.

Street address: ___________________________

City: ___________________________ State: _______ Zip Code: ________________

Email: ___________________________ Secondary Email: ___________________________

Phone: ___________________________ (home) (work) (cell) – circle one
APPENDIX B

Items to Measure Commitment

Items adapted from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Item (alpha = .91)</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students’ Commitment to the Goal of Graduating from their Institution.</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students’ Perceptions of their Institution’s Commitment to the Goal of Graduating Students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.</td>
<td>I am committed to maintaining my relationship with UHM.</td>
<td>UHM is committed to maintaining its relationship with me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want our relationship to last for a very long time.</td>
<td>I want to attend UHM until I graduate.</td>
<td>UHM wants me to attend until I graduate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner.</td>
<td>I feel very attached to my relationship with UHM—very strongly linked to the university.</td>
<td>UHM feels very attached to its relationship with me—very strongly linked to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is likely that I will date someone other than my partner within the next year.*</td>
<td>It is likely that I will attend another college or university within the next year.*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.*</td>
<td>I would not feel very upset if I were to stop attending UHM in the near future.*</td>
<td>UHM would not feel very upset if I were to stop attending in the near future.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want our relationship to last forever.</td>
<td>I want my relationship with UHM to last forever.</td>
<td>UHM wants our relationship to last forever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the future, I want to be an alumnus of UHM.</td>
<td></td>
<td>UHM wants me to be a future alumnus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship...</td>
<td>I am oriented toward graduating from UHM.</td>
<td>UHM is oriented toward the long term goal of graduating me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Notes: An asterisk represents a reverse scored item. Also, all items assessing commitment in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting stronger commitment.

(APPENDIX B: Items to Measure Commitment is continued on the next page)
APPENDIX B

Items to Measure Commitment (continued)

Items Adapted from Pascarella and Terenzini (1980):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Item (alpha = .71)</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Commitment to the Goal of Graduating from their Institution.</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Perceptions of their Institution's Commitment to the Goal of Graduating Students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important for me to graduate from college.</td>
<td>It is important for me to graduate from UHM.</td>
<td>It is important to UHM that I graduate from UHM.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident that I made the right decision in choosing to attend this university.</td>
<td>I am confident that I made the right decision in choosing to attend UHM.</td>
<td>UHM is confident that they made the right decision in choosing to have me attend UHM.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is likely that I will register at this university next fall.</td>
<td><em>It is likely that I will register at this university next semester.</em></td>
<td><em>It is likely that UHM will allow me to register next semester.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is not important to me to graduate from this university.*</td>
<td>It is not important to me to graduate from this university.*</td>
<td>It is not important to UHM that I graduate from UHM.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no idea what I want to major in.*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting good grades is not important to me.*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Notes: An asterisk represents a reverse scored item. Also, all items assessing commitment in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting stronger commitment. Italicized items were eliminated after conducting reliability assessments. To prompt participants about how to respond to items referring to perceptions of UHM, the following directions were used: “When thinking about UHM, consider the university as a whole, including your experiences with your professors, offices on campus, other faculty members, and university staff.”
APPENDIX C

Items to Measure Persistence

1. Is it your goal to graduate from UHM?  Yes No
2. Will you register at UHM next semester?  Yes No
3. Will you register at UHM next Fall?  Yes No
4. How likely are you to graduate from UHM?
   Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very likely
5. How confident are you that you will graduate from UHM?
   Not confident 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very confident
6. How likely are you to transfer to another university before graduating?
   Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very likely
APPENDIX D

Items to Measure Satisfaction

Items adapted from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Item (alpha = .92)</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Satisfaction with their Institution.</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Perceptions of their Institution's Satisfaction with Students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel satisfied with our relationship.</td>
<td>I feel satisfied with my relationship with UHM.</td>
<td>UHM is satisfied with its relationship with me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My relationship is much better than others' relationships.</td>
<td>Attending UHM is much better than the colleges and universities that others attend.</td>
<td>UHM feels that I am a better student than students at other colleges or universities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My relationship is close to ideal.</td>
<td>My relationship with UHM is close to ideal.</td>
<td>UHMs relationship with me is close to ideal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our relationship makes me very happy.</td>
<td>Attending UHM makes me very happy.</td>
<td>UHM is happy having me attend as a student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our relationship does a good job of fulfilling my needs for intimacy.</td>
<td>My relationship with UHM does good job of fulfilling my needs.</td>
<td>UHM's relationship with me does a good job of fulfilling UHM's needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All items assessing satisfaction in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting stronger satisfaction. Also, to prompt participants about how to respond to items referring to perceptions of UHM, the following directions were used: “When thinking about UHM, consider the university as a whole, including your experiences with your professors, offices on campus, other faculty members, and university staff.”
APPENDIX E

Items to Measure Quality of Alternatives

Items Adapted from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Item (alpha = .82)</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students’ Quality of Alternatives to their Institution.</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students’ Perceptions of their Institution’s Quality of Alternatives to Students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If I weren’t dating my partner, I would do fine – I would find another appealing…</td>
<td>If I weren’t attending UHM, I would do fine – I would find other appealing alternatives.</td>
<td>If I weren’t attending UHM, the university would find other appealing alternatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My alternatives are attractive to me (dating another, spending time…)</td>
<td>My alternatives to UHM are attractive to me.</td>
<td>UHM’s alternatives to me are attractive to UHM.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My alternatives to our relationship are close to ideal…</td>
<td>My alternatives to attending UHM are close to ideal.</td>
<td>UHM’s alternatives to me are close to ideal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The people other than my partner … are very appealing.</td>
<td>Colleges and universities other than UHM are very appealing to me.</td>
<td>Other students are very appealing to UHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc. could easily be fulfilled.</td>
<td>My college academic needs could easily be fulfilled elsewhere.</td>
<td>UHM’s needs could easily be fulfilled elsewhere.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All items assessing alternatives in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting more alternatives. Also, to prompt participants about how to respond to items referring to perceptions of UHM, the following directions were used: “When thinking about UHM, consider the university as a whole, including your experiences with your professors, offices on campus, other faculty members, and university staff.”

(APPENDIX E: Items to Measure Quality of Alternatives is continued on the next page)
APPENDIX E

Items to Measure Quality of Alternatives (continued)

Items Adapted from Beil, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan (1999):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Item (alpha = .69)</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Quality of Alternatives to their Institution.</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Perceptions of their Institution's Quality of Alternatives to Students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On balance I'd rather be home than here.</td>
<td>On balance I'd rather be home than at UHM.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lately, I have been giving a lot of thought to transferring to another college.</td>
<td>Lately, I have been giving a lot of thought to transferring to another college.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lately, I have been giving a lot of thought to dropping out of college altogether or for good.</td>
<td>Lately, I have been giving a lot of thought to dropping out of college altogether or for good.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find myself giving considerable thought to taking some time off from college and finishing at some later time.</td>
<td>I find myself giving considerable thought to taking some time off from UHM and finishing at some later time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All items assessing alternatives in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting more alternatives. Also, to prompt participants about how to respond to items referring to perceptions of UHM, the following directions were used: "When thinking about UHM, consider the university as a whole, including your experiences with your professors, offices on campus, other faculty members, and university staff."
APPENDIX F

Items to Measure Investment Size

Items Adapted from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Item (alpha = .84)</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Investment into their Institution.</th>
<th>Items Adapted to Measure Students' Perceptions of their Institution's Investment into Students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose...</td>
<td>I have put a great deal into my relationship with UHM.</td>
<td>UHM has put a great deal into our relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared to other people I know, I have invested a great deal...</td>
<td>Compared to other students I know, I have invested a great deal into UHM...</td>
<td>Compared to other universities I know of, UHM has invested a great deal into me...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel very involved in our relationship - like I have put a great deal into it.</td>
<td>I feel very involved in being a student at UHM - like I have put a great deal into it.</td>
<td>UHM feels very involved in our relationship - like they have put a great deal into it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many aspects of my life have become linked to my partner...</td>
<td>Many aspects of my life have become linked to UHM.</td>
<td>Many aspects of UHM have become linked to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My relationships with friends and family members would be complicated if...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All items assessing investment in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting larger investment. Also, to prompt participants about how to respond to items referring to perceptions of UHM, the following directions were used: “When thinking about UHM, consider the university as a whole, including your experiences with your professors, offices on campus, other faculty members, and university staff.”
APPENDIX G

Items for Validity Check:

A Measure Students' Consideration of their Institution's Perceptions of Them

1. To what extent do you think about UHM's commitment to you?
2. To what extent do you think about whether UHM cares about you?
3. To what extent do you think about UHM's satisfaction with you?
4. To what extent do you think about whether UHM is happy with you?
5. To what extent do you think about UHM having alternatives to you, such as recruiting or retaining other students?
6. To what extent do you think about UHM having alternative priorities (e.g., research endeavors, community involvement) other than you as a student?
7. To what extent do you think about whether UHM focuses on alternatives (e.g., other students or priorities) to you?
8. To what extent do you think about UHM putting time and resources into you?
9. To what extent do you think about whether UHM has invested in you?

Note: All items assessing the validity of constructs in the present study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scale response categories (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting more consideration of the construct. Also, to prompt participants about how to respond to items referring to perceptions of UHM, the following directions were used: "When thinking about UHM, consider the university as a whole, including your experiences with your professors, offices on campus, other faculty members, and university staff."
MISSING PAGE NO.

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AT THE TIME OF MICROFILMING
APPENDIX H

Items to Measure Demographic Data

1. Did you begin college here or did you transfer from another institution?
   Choose one: Began college here, Transfer student

2. For transfer students, did you attend a community college before coming to UHM?
   Choose one: Yes, No

3. Are you an in state or out of state student
   Choose one: In State, Out of State, International

4. If you are currently taking any classes at a community college, how many credits are you taking there?

5. What is your student status?
   Choose one: Full time, Part time

6. What is your current class standing?
   Choose one: Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Other

7. What year are you in college?
   1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, 4th year, 5th year, 6th year, other

8. How many credits have you completed in college?

9. How many credit hours did you take this term (Fall, 2007)?

10. How many credit hours will you register for next term (Spring, 2008)?

11. How likely will you transfer to another college or university before graduation?
    Not likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very likely

12. How old are you? _______ years old

13. What is your gender? Male Female

14. Which of the following best describes your ethnic or racial background? (circle only one response)

   (1) White/Caucasian   (5) Chinese   (9) Mixed: no Hawaiian
   (2) Japanese          (6) Korean     (10) Hispanic
   (3) Filipino          (7) Samoan     (11) Other: __________
   (4) Hawaiian or Part-
       Hawaiian          (8) Black/African-
                           American

(APPENDIX H: Items to Measure Demographic Data is continued on the next page)
15. To what extent do you identify with your ethnic or racial background?
   Very little  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very much

16. Do you have any scholarships from UHM to attend school here?
   Choose one: Yes, No

17. What is the total value of the scholarships you have received from UHM?
   $__________

18. Do you receive financial aid from the government in order to attend UH?
   Choose one: Yes, No

19. About how much of your college expenses this year were provided by your parents or family (including your own contribution)?
   All or nearly all  More than half  Less than half  None or very little

20. Was the University of Hawaii at Manoa your (circle one)
   1st Choice  2nd Choice  3rd Choice  Other

21. Are you enrolled in the ACE program?
   Choose one: Yes, No
Table 1.

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach’s Alpha for all Variables, N = 126*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students’</strong>:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Relational)</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Educational)</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction Level</td>
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<td>1.06</td>
<td>.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of Alternatives</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investment Size</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.89</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Students’ Perception of their Institution’s</strong>:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Relational)</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (Educational)</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>.74</td>
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<td>Satisfaction Level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of Alternatives</td>
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<td>4.13</td>
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<td>.92</td>
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<td>Commitment Validity Check</td>
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<td>Satisfaction Validity Check</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of Alternatives Validity Check</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.29</td>
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<td>Investment Size Validity Check</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>.91</td>
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</table>
Table 2.

Variable Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients ($N = 125$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students':</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Commitment (Relational)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.72**</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>-.63**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Commitment (Educational)</td>
<td>.72**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>-.53**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.37**</td>
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<td>3. Satisfaction Level</td>
<td>.65**</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
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<td>4. Quality of Alternatives</td>
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<td>-.53**</td>
<td>-.52**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.15</td>
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<td>5. Investment</td>
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<td>.43**</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ Perception of Institution’s:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Commitment (Relational)</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.42**</td>
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<td>.56**</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Commitment (Educational)</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
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<td>.32**</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.43**</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Satisfaction Level</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
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<td>.43**</td>
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<td>.52**</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>.63**</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Quality of Alternatives</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Investment</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p* < .05, **p* < .01, one-tailed test
Figure 1: 13 Testable Propositions of Tinto’s (1993) Interactionalist Model of Student Persistence as distilled by Braxton and colleagues (see Braxton & Lee, 2005).
References


ENDNOTES

1 Debate exists as to whether students who persist should do so within four or five years. Historically, a student who persisted was one who reached degree completion within four years. Currently though, national retention assessments have begun to measure student retention as the number of students who reach their degree completion within five years. For the purposes of the present investigation, a student was only considered a persister if he or she completed their prescribed course of study within four years. This decision was made for two primary reasons; first, because the University of Hawai‘i defines itself as a ‘four year institution’ and second, so that the retention data found in the study can be compared to past university data.