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## Academic Adaptation of 1st Year Students: Promoting Success and Permanence at the University\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to develop a theoretical reflection from the understanding of the multifaceted phenomena that are present in the entry of students in higher education. This construct contemplated the expectations that this new context causes in students and the impact of the first adaptive experiences on the student's success and permanence in the university. The transition and adaptation to higher education are real challenges and are described through different adaptive dimensions in relation to the institution, studies, peers, demands for personal and emotional autonomy, or career planning. Alternative ways to prevent early university dropout are proposed, understood as the right that students have to start and finish their studies with quality, with due academic, social and political support, available in higher education institutions. Therefore, this paper seeks to reflect on new training practices at this level of teaching in front of students, who are potentially more vulnerable in terms of skills development. It covers the need for social, psychological and educational support, designed to support students' university success and, consequently, the completion of their courses, reducing dropout rates, which tend to be higher among 1st year students.

### KEYWORDS

Higher education. Student adjustment. Dropout rate. Students. Academic achievement.

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## Adaptação Acadêmica de Estudantes do 1º ano: Promovendo o Sucesso e a Permanência na Universidade

### RESUMO

O presente artigo tem como objetivo desenvolver uma reflexão teórica a partir da compreensão dos fenômenos multifacetados que estão presentes no ingresso do estudante no ensino superior. Este constructo contemplou as expectativas que este novo contexto provoca nos estudantes e o impacto das primeiras vivências adaptativas no êxito e permanência do estudante na universidade. A transição e adaptação ao ensino superior constituem verdadeiros desafios e são descritas através de diferentes dimensões adaptativas em relação à instituição, aos estudos, aos seus pares, às exigências de autonomia pessoal e emocional, ou ao planejamento da carreira. Propõem-se alternativas de prevenção ao abandono universitário precoce, aqui entendido como o direito que o estudante possui de iniciar e concluir seus estudos com qualidade, com o devido suporte acadêmico, social e político, disponível nas instituições de ensino superior. Busca-se, portanto, uma reflexão sobre novas práticas formativas nesse nível de ensino diante dos alunos, os quais, potencialmente, estão mais vulneráveis em termos de desenvolvimento de competências. Abrange-se a necessidade de apoio social, psicológico e educativo, destinado a apoiar o êxito universitário dos estudantes e, conseqüentemente, a conclusão dos seus cursos, fazendo diminuir as taxas de abandono, tendencialmente mais elevadas entre os estudantes do 1º ano.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Ensino superior. Adaptação escolar. Estudantes. Êxito escolar.

## Adaptación Académica de Estudiantes del 1º año: Promoviendo el Éxito y la Permanencia en la Universidad

### RESUMEN

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo desarrollar una reflexión teórica a partir de la comprensión de los fenómenos multifacéticos que están presentes en el ingreso del estudiante en la enseñanza superior. Ese constructo contempló las expectativas que ese nuevo contexto provoca en los estudiantes y el impacto de las primeras vivencias adaptativas en el éxito y permanencia del estudiante en la universidad. La transición y la adaptación a la educación superior constituyen verdaderos desafíos y se describen a través de diferentes dimensiones adaptativas en relación a la institución, los estudios, sus pares, las exigencias de autonomía personal y emocional o la planificación de la carrera. Se propone alternativas de prevención al abandono universitario precoz, entendido aquí como el derecho que el estudiante posee de iniciar y concluir sus estudios con calidad, con el debido apoyo académico, social y político disponible en las instituciones de enseñanza superior. Se busca, así, una reflexión sobre nuevas prácticas formativas en ese nivel de enseñanza, frente a los alumnos que, potencialmente, son más vulnerables en relación con el desarrollo de competencias, abarcando la necesidad de apoyo social, psicológico y educativo, buscando el éxito universitario de los estudiantes y, conseqüentemente, la finalización de sus cursos, haciendo disminuir las tasas de abandono, tendencialmente más elevadas junto a los estudiantes del 1º año.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Enseñanza superior. Adaptación del estudiante. Estudiante. Rendimiento escolar.

## Introduction

Admission to the university begins a period of many transformations, challenges and personal achievements by the student. For most, obtaining a higher education degree represents the realization of their own dreams and that of their family, as it promotes social ascension and the achievement of financial independence when entering the job market in the chosen professional area. The situation deserves even more attention given the diversity of students in terms of their expectations, previous academic background and vocational projects, not to mention the progressive heterogeneity of students in geographic, social and cultural terms that today ascend to HE. With the progressive democratization and widespread access to higher education, there is also a greater ethnic and age diversity of students as access to increasing percentages of the population becomes widespread. (ALMEIDA; ARAÚJO; MARTINS, 2016; CASANOVA; ALMEIDA, 2016).

For the student, in terms of training, attending university means a new look and a new way of looking at studies and other academic activities. It is expected a greater involvement of them in tasks, greater autonomy and responsibility with learning, that is, a commitment of young people on their way to adulthood, guided by greater responsibility with regard to participation in classes and carrying out academic work. Since teachers and their feedbacks are generally less present in basic and secondary education, students in Higher Education (HE) will have to learn to develop and manage increasing levels of autonomy and self-regulation. Thus, young people, in their adaptive process to the new context, will have to deal with a set of changes that include new patterns of relationship with colleagues and teachers, in addition to experiencing a more diffuse academic environment and institutional climate guided by a greater diversity of values.

On the other hand, international organizations highlight the relevance of HE for the economy and development of each country. The competition that exists today on a global level requires a greater number of senior staff in the various areas of social and economic life. Accordingly, the increase in public and family investment in HE is due to the importance of academic training in a constantly evolving social and business world. In the same way, the complexity and unpredictability of the market are increasingly higher. In this sense, institutions are also required to be more concerned with the quality of training provided and higher rates of graduating students. This training, not only technical and scientific, has the duty to be more comprehensive today and to provide individuals with tools for a process of permanent training throughout life. Thus, in view of the investments and the institutions' own social responsibility, academic failure and dropout of students in HE are problems that require study, in order to overcome them.

The high failure and dropout rates in the first year of higher education require institutional measures to promote academic success (CENSO DA EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR, 2018; BRASIL, 2019; MARINHO-ARAÚJO *et al.*, 2015). There are countless searches for strategic solutions to the problems that cause school dropout, as well as ensuring the quality

of educational projects. In this way, an attempt is made to outline greater training efficiency considering the multiplicity of factors that intervene in it, the government structures, the study cycles, the human and material resources associated with them, the environments of learning and psychosocial development provided (CASTRO ; ALMEIDA, 2016; IGUE; BARIANI; MILANESI, 2008; OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2019; SOARES *et al.*, 2019; TOMÁS *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the promotion of school success in HE has been assumed, in recent years, as a fundamental objective of public policies and action of academic institutions, and failure and school dropout cannot be considered relevant problems, either for students affected, both for the higher education system and for society as a whole (FERREIRA *et al.*, 2019).

For some students, accessing higher education can cause difficulties in many areas of their lives, with regard to integration with new colleagues, with teachers, with the new pace of study imposed, with the removal of the family, causing many to sometimes give up their goals, leaving the university. There are many studies pointing out the problem of school failure and permanence, highlighting that the process of entering higher education, the way the student will experience it is crucial in the development of their academic path. Hence the importance of this theme in understanding how the process of transition and permanence in the university has taken place, in the perspective of university expansion.

This article aims to develop a theoretical reflection based on understanding the process of joining and adapting to the new institution, studies, peers and the demands for personal and emotional autonomy, which are indispensable for entering higher education. A bibliographic search was made in which articles were searched in the scielo database of the last five years, and a filtering was also carried out based on the titles of the abstracts found, to be used in this work in depth.

To this end, in the following sessions we present a brief history of the HE scenario in Brazil, mainly from the perspective of university expansion, providing an opportunity to look at the profile of the groups of students benefited by such policies. We also seek to understand the main aspects involved in the transition and adaptation process of these students and, consequently, the challenges encountered by students and educational institutions.

## Contextualization of Higher Education in Brazil

Currently, with the development of countries, the main challenge in terms of education is to ensure quality education that can be extended to the entire population, including higher education. Latin American countries have sought to offer opportunities for learning, research and, consequently, qualified work for their population, in an attempt to remain on an equal footing with the countries that make up the global market. (MIRANDA; STALLIVIERI, 2017).

In Brazil, the expansion of higher education is related to the guidelines formulated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank, which advocate the expansion of this level of education through a more flexible and agile model of academic organization, prioritizing institutional diversification strategies to meet the population's growing demand for higher education. The increase in vacancies and enrollments at this level of education began in the 2000s, considering the need for greater professional qualification in accessing the labor market (IGUE; BARIANI; MILANESI, 2008; OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2019; PORTO; SOARES, 2017; SAMPAIO, 2014). This democratization process was established with the policy of increasing the number of universities, which immediately increased the number of places for access to HE and ensured that more students of different conditions and profiles would rise to this level of education (GARRIDO; CALHEIROS, 2016). This expansion implied investment in access through various measures, both in the private and public spheres. (SACCARO; FRANCA; JACINTO, 2019; SCHLESENER; PEREIRA, 2016).

In view of this growth and diversity of audiences, the academic population has changed, until then relatively homogeneous and coming from the most favored social classes, causing a notable massification and social diversity of the population that started to attend universities (ARAÚJO; ALMEIDA, 2015; MARINHO -ARAÚJO *et al.*, 2015). This new profile has been characterized by students from low-income families, also called first-generation students, because within their families they are the first to access HE (TERENZINI *et al.*, 1996). For these students, transition and adaptation to higher education are very significant probationary periods, since several of them enter without sufficient skills and personal resources to respond to the demands felt, needing special attention from institutions, teachers and support services in this area. approaching the new reality and overcoming challenges (ALMEIDA, 2019).

Brazil, when compared to most Latin American countries, is still at a disadvantage, falling short of most middle-income countries, since in the country only 15% of the population has a higher education degree. The roots of this low frequency seem to be related to the great inequality of opportunities in the country (HERINGER, 2018). In recent years, however, studies point to an exponential increase in the number and diversity of students. Thus, more and more, newcomers differ in terms of socioeconomic and cultural profile, age group, previous academic history, expectations and professional projects, among other aspects (OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2019; PORTO; SOARES, 2017; SAMPAIO, 2014).

When reflecting on the number of candidates annually, their proportion is still below that observed in other developing countries. In Brazil, in 2017, according to the Higher Education Census, there were 2,448 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), distributed in 199 universities, 189 university centers and 2,020 colleges, almost entirely private (BRASIL, 2019). In 2018, more than 13.5 million vacancies were offered in undergraduate courses, with 72.9% new vacancies and 26.9% remaining vacancies. That same year, 3.4 million students started undergraduate higher education courses, with 83.1% of this total enrolled in private institutions. Also in 2018, the number of new entrants grew by 6.8% compared to 2017,

sustained by the significant increase in distance learning courses, which compensated for the drop registered in on-site courses. The number of enrollments in higher education (undergraduate and sequential) continued to grow, reaching the mark of 8.45 million students in 2018 (BRASIL, 2019).

Searching for ways to facilitate access to higher education, the Federal Government has promoted programs aimed at low-income students, such as: Student Financing Program (FIES); University for All Program (PROUNI); Social and Racial Inclusion Program (COTAS); entrance exams in public higher education institutions; INCLUIR Program, aimed at people with disabilities; Support Program for Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (REUNI); and implementation of the Unified Selection System (SiSU). However, it is essential to create public policies aimed at the permanence of this public in HE, favoring their permanence and academic success (SILVA; SANTOS, 2017). The main barrier pointed out in these programs is that they do not contemplate a permanence strategy, since most students face material and academic difficulties related to their path in basic education and their economic, social and cultural capital. These conditions are reflected in higher dropout rates long before they were formed (PAULA, 2017).

In this sense, although Brazil offers opportunities for vacancies with a doubling of enrollments that continue to expand, these measures are still incipient to meet the demand of students able to take advantage of training at this level, or also the demand for placement of professionals in the job market (MIRANDA; STALLIVIERI, 2017).

To understand these numbers, it is necessary to analyze the functioning of the Brazilian basic education system, notably organized in private and public schools - the latter, in smaller numbers, generally of better quality and aimed at the elite, a social stratum where students are better prepared to be approved in a greater proportion in the entrance exams to the best Brazilian universities, that is, public universities at no cost to the student (MARANHÃO; VERAS, 2017; SILVA; SANTOS, 2017). For those with lower purchasing power, mostly Black and Brown people, it remains to join higher private institutions, for which they will need to pay (HERINGER, 2018).

Thus, the expansion of access to HE represents a huge step towards the democratization of education, however, it is not enough to cover the heterogeneous public that enters these institutions, especially those from historically excluded social strata (SACCARO; FRANCA; JACINTO, 2019).

The equity of the higher education system cannot be located only at the level of access, but must widen and be present in the creation of the conditions so that most of the new entrants can succeed and complete their training. Entry into higher education does not only mean the dissemination of knowledge, but also the possibility of the university's experience, in terms of socialization and discoveries (ALMEIDA, 2019; ALMEIDA; ARAÚJO; MARTINS, 2016).



In effect, what is perceived in this perspective of inclusion and access of students in universities is that the increase in places and the number of new students has not been accompanied by the permanence of students in the system and the completion of their courses. With decreasing completion rates for undergraduate courses, the past few years have shown that the phenomena of inclusion, exclusion, permanence and evasion must be analyzed together (PAULA, 2017).

Along these lines, problematizing the inclusion of these new profiles in the current university model means pointing out challenges for the near future. Therefore, universities must restructure internally and be open to the new possibilities of receiving and welcoming this new public, which, for decades, was excluded from this level of education. Institutions must break prejudices and abandon already weakened pedagogical systems, at the same time that teachers need to attend to the diversity of students who attend their classes. Far from the times when their courses were accessed by a population elite, today there are diverse life projects, expectations and academic skills of students present in their classes.

### The Transition to University: The Challenges of Adaptation

The transition to university is marked by a set of challenges that are part of the new stage of life that begins. This moment provides students with the opportunity to get to know and reflect on this academic path, in which issues of identity, autonomy and responsibility will be involved (CASANOVA; ALMEIDA, 2016; GARRIDO; CALHEIROS, 2016; KERBY, 2015). The young person, or young adult, does not always have the personal resources necessary for the challenges of academic transition and adaptation, since this moment is equivalent to adapting to another space, another environment, other relationships and other responsibilities.

In this context, one can mention leaving home for the first time, separating family and friends, moving to an unknown environment and the new social and study demands that demand greater autonomy (OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2019). The success or failure of individuals in the educational system is often related to the family resources available, thus occurring a process of educational stratification: the selection and socialization in relation to the social origin of individuals (MENDES; COSTA, 2015).

For Bourdieu (2010a), when the student already behaves as a member of the new group, it means that he acquired a new student habitus: the initial period of estrangement, which happens in the first weeks of arrival at the educational institution, is left behind, when the student does not know the formal rules, nor the colleagues and teachers, when he also does not know the competences and skills that will be required in the development of the disciplines. Academic and social integration allows students to create a sense of belonging and identity both with the institution and with its different agents, favoring the permanence and continuation of studies at the institution (FIGUEIREDO, 2018). For this path to develop naturally, it is important that university environments are aware of the lack of autonomy and maturity of some students, and that they provide specialized support services when necessary. (CERDEIRA *et al.*, 2016).

Most students refer to this new context as a period full of demands, taking as a starting point the activities, tasks and new responsibilities that are so different and unknown (CASANOVA; ALMEIDA, 2016). The situation is aggravated for students from less favored socio-cultural strata, who may present less knowledge and anticipation of the realities they will encounter along this path, as well as less personal resources to face such demands. These students will also tend to need more support, such as institutional welcoming measures, tutoring and psychopedagogical monitoring by teachers or more experienced colleagues, for example (MARINHO-ARAÚJO *et al.*, 2015). At this point, it reflects on the perspective of Cultural Capital, which suggests that children of families with low levels of capital will be subject to not sharing the culture of the ruling class, composed of values, habits, and ways of expressing themselves that are not transmitted through the formal education system, but through the education of the family environment. (BOURDIEU, 2010b).

The importance attributed to academic experiences in the first year of college emphasizes how these changes and requirements can interfere with students' academic performance, generating failure and abandonment (GARRIDO; CALHEIROS, 2016). In this sense, several studies analyze the transition and adaptation, identified as complex and multivariate phenomena. Understanding academic adaptation as a student integration movement in ES, it is recognized that in this process the students' cognitive, social and affective resources play a decisive role. These resources allow to overcome difficulties, such as, for example, making the student enjoy the various learning conditions with gains for his professional training, or, on the contrary, enable the development of feelings of low self-efficacy to face such difficulties. (SANTOS; OLIVEIRA; DIAS, 2015; SOARES *et al.*, 2019).

The students' expectations or beliefs in overcoming these difficulties end up being relevant in the adaptation process, especially when this audience feels distant from family and close friends (BAIER; MARKMAN; PERNICE-DUCA, 2016; IGUE; BARIANI; MILANESI, 2008; OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2019). In more serious situations, students can experience feelings of loneliness, anxiety and greater vulnerability, compromising to overcome the multiple difficulties and demands posed by the new context, such as economic costs, meeting new friends, managing classes with new teaching methods. teaching of teachers or acceptance of new learning methods, for example (FERNÁNDEZ-RODRÍGUEZ; SOTO-LÓPEZ; CUESTA, 2019).

In this context, educational institutions must be attentive to the reception conditions of their new students, because, in order to be involved in studies, a connection of personal and school interests is necessary, that is, a good level of motivation and commitment of students with the university and the contents learned (ASTIN, 1999; COVAS; VEIGA, 2018). These students do not always have or quickly acquire this level of competence and autonomy, sometimes lowering their levels of expectation of becoming successful (SOARES *et al.*, 2019). Concerns about social integration and academic performance often lead to high levels of stress, excessive consumption of alcohol and other substances, feelings of dissatisfaction, lack of commitment and intentions to drop out of school, factors that may indicate a



probability of failure or abandonment (TINTO, 1993, 1997). In particular, the teaching and assessment methodologies of teachers must adapt to the reality of new audiences, it is important to diversify the forms of teaching and take into account the characteristics and needs of students (ALMEIDA; ARAÚJO; MARTINS, 2016; ASTIN, 1999; BALL, 1995).

Several personal and contextual variables impact the quality of academic adaptation of students entering HE. Leaving the parents' home for the first time, for example, can deprive the student of emotional support, felt as important (PASCARELLA *et al.* 2004; TEREZINI *et al.*, 1996). Still in the family context, the socioeconomic status of the family can not only explain previous academic paths of different quality, but also translate into different forms of student involvement in HE. For example, students from the most disadvantaged social strata may experience greater difficulties in learning and academic success, persisting and completing courses in lower percentages (TERENZINI *et al.*, 1996; TINTO, 1993). Students who access with greater levels of autonomy and responsibility in their role as students tend to achieve greater academic success and persist in their training (PASCARELLA; TEREZINI, 2005; TINTO, 1997).

Some contextual variables can also be pointed out in the process of adapting to higher education. Students mention their frustration at not finding teachers motivated by teaching, innovative curricula and teaching practices or curriculum components related to the desired career and profession (ARAÚJO; ALMEIDA, 2015; ASTIN, 1999). Campus life can also be mentioned, namely the values cultivated, the spaces of relationship with colleagues and involvement in extracurricular activities (ALMEIDA, 2019; ALMEIDA; ARAÚJO; MARTINS, 2016).

In summary, the adaptation to higher education represents, for many young people, a critical moment, since it may represent a discontinuity of habits experienced in relation to the higher educational experience. This implies a set of changes both with regard to their intellectual, personal and psychosocial growth, resulting in a level of autonomy and maturity higher than that presented by several students. Hence the need for HEIs to rethink effective alternatives around the reception of these students, especially those in the first year. It is necessary to think not only about the students' school performance, but also about preparing them globally, in the different spheres of their academic life.

The creation of preventive measures for the adaptation and permanence of students entering the first year of university courses and the understanding of what already exists in this stage of life can favor the adaptation of students, their learning and integral development, in addition to the consequent control dropout rates, consequently higher in the 1st year. Thus, institutions must assess the satisfaction of incoming students, this variable being an early indicator of their permanence at the university (ALMEIDA *et al.*, 2019; CASANOVA; ALMEIDA, 2016; OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2019).

The teaching practices of teachers is another variable with an impact on student adaptation. Research indicates that the classic model, in which the teacher is the sole holder of information and students are passive subjects, is outdated and no longer meets the demands of new generations (SILVA; SANTOS, 2017). The current educational scenario needs to bring current themes to the classroom, use of technologies and more active student participation (ISHITANI, 2016; KERBY 2015). Cooperative learning experiences and small group work can facilitate students' academic involvement, the quality of their learning and interaction with their peers (OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2019).

The university needs to be prepared to accommodate the needs of its students, supporting them in their psychosocial development, in the quality of their training and in the effective completion of their graduation (ALMEIDA; ARAÚJO; MARTINS, 2016; TINTO, 1997). Institutions have a responsibility to meet the diverse profiles of students they host (CERDEIRA *et al.*, 2016; GARRIDO; CALHEIROS, 2016), implementing preventive measures that reinforce their attachment or prevent their progressive abandonment (ROSA; MILANI; SANTOS, 2020).

To meet this diversity of audiences is to provide opportunities for academic involvement and enrichment of life experiences at the university, consolidating more participatory policies, collectively built and thought from its subjects (ANSAY; MOREIRA, 2020; HERINGER, 2018).

The democratization of access must be accompanied by measures that enable the student to succeed and stay at the university. Public policies to support and prevent abandonment must be on the agenda of institutions, which must provide support services involving psychological, social and / or educational aspects, minimizing the impacts that this transition may have on their student body.

## Final Considerations

This article proposed to make a theoretical reflection based on the phenomena present in the context of the student's entry into higher education, the expectations that this new period brings and the impact of these experiences on the student's success and permanence in the university. To this end, we sought to contextualize higher education in Brazil, in particular with policies to encourage entry into this level of education and the consequent increase in the number of places. The first year of university is known to be a critical period for many students. Those who enter with less preparation to face the demands of this new context end up presenting greater difficulties in their adaptation. Such difficulties will, in most cases, be overcome, however some students prolong psychological, social and academic suffering by not satisfactorily overcoming such barriers.

During his school career, the student needs to develop skills that facilitate his process within this new environment that is the university, considering that the initial periods are the most difficult, as they require coping skills and social resourcefulness. Hence the importance that, throughout the course, more information about the chosen area can be decisive for the student's permanence, because the sooner the institutions clarify the specific content of the chosen study area, the faster the student can envision its realization in future professional life.

The students' progressive academic disengagement goes through issues that involve dysfunctional school hours, poorly structured courses, unattractive classes, poorly maintained spaces and equipment, teachers who are less attentive to their students or little call for student participation in institutional decisions. Educational institutions are, therefore, decisive in their formative role of inclusion and integration of students with varied profiles, who often come from disadvantaged socio-cultural groups and from families with no tradition of attending HE. These students end up experiencing greater difficulties in their academic adaptation. These actions should point, for example, to the restructuring of a more cooperative learning model and the degree of flexibility of the curricula, since the way this student learns has to do with what makes sense to them. There must be a guarantee that the student's perspective is seen and heard, so that they can develop critical and creative thinking, and build their space of voice and self-regulation.

Although the institutions do not have total control over the various characteristics of students, understanding their effect on the persistence of studies can be useful for the development of profiles of students at risk, with efficient guidance from specialized support services. The creation of social action and psychological and educational support services, equipped with specialized professionals, is understood as a necessary tool in helping students who experience greater difficulties in the socioeconomic, personal and academic areas, since the pressure they feel on their performance is something that deserves more attention. The university tends to condition students' results and their involvement with studies.

Proposals for public policies and educational programs aimed exclusively at HE are still incipient, as well as studies related to academic adaptation in different regions of Brazil, since these works are concentrated more in the Southeast and South regions. For future works, it is important to consider that HEIs should invest in conducting studies on academic adaptation, focusing on students in the early years, favoring knowledge of integration difficulties and their adjustment. Through these studies, it will be possible to implement strategies that promote involvement in studies, decrease the risk of dropping out and create a general environment seen by the student as significant and stimulating. It is these initial perceptions and representations that will determine student adaptation and adjustment to new academic and social dynamics.

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