Transition and Retention of At-Risk College Students

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Higher Education is becoming more critical in order to have a comfortable life and to be competitive in today's job market. Gaining a degree helps people stay competitive. More and more people are seeking degrees, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019). In 1940, only 5.5% of men and 3.8% of women held four-year degrees or higher; today, 35.3% of women and 34.3% of men hold four-year degrees or higher. According to the National Center for Education (2019), nearly 90% of Americans age 21 to 29 have graduated high school. With such high success rates, why do 60% of those students start college, and only 35% gain a degree? Are there ways of identifying and helping those who may struggle? Who are these "at-risk" students, and what can we do to help them succeed? What policies, procedures, and programs do schools have in place to keep the students enrolled? What can they do to increase degree attainment?

Since the 1970s, schools have been focusing on at-risk students' retention rates and how to improve them. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), in collaboration with, ACT has been conducting national studies on academic advising since 1979. (ACT 2010) Those and other studies have been used to identify populations that were at-risk and to decipher how we can best serve those populations to reduce their dropout rates, which according to ACT (2010) is over 50% for first-year students at the community college level and near 25% at four-year institutions. With such high dropout rates, schools first need to understand what the risk factors are and what they can do to help those populations succeed.

Horton (2015) broke down at-risk factors into four categories: 1) background, 2) individual characteristics, 3) environmental characteristics, and 4) behavioral. Background refers to factors such as a student being: academically disadvantaged, academically unprepared, lower socioeconomic status, an older student, a minority, from a single-parent family, 1st generation to attend college, among others. Individual characteristics refer to students with; disabilities, chronic health or psychological factors, substance abuse, learned helplessness, childcare responsibility, lack of; goal clarity, independence, coping skills, self-discipline, or motivation, low levels of; self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, or self-efficacy, and other factors. Environmental characteristics refer to; the cost of college, racism, sexism, any other bias, negative peer culture, workforce issues, transportation time and costs, issues with support services, course offerings, and more. Behavioral can be broken into four categories: perseverance, academic mindset, learning skills, and social skills. So many factors contribute to the success of a college student, but some colleges have developed programs to help mitigate the problems associated with those factors.

Successful programs such as academic advising help schools monitor and help the at-risk population. Tutoring centers, learning assistance centers, workshops, and classes in test-taking and learning strategies, study skills, and time management can also be beneficial. The most in-depth and useful information found was Morales' (2014) "Learning from Success." He gives examples of practices that colleges can implement to improve the retention of at-risk students. Each characteristic listed is paired with interventions the staff can utilize. The most common characteristic stated was self-efficacy, which was identified by 92% of the students as a key component to success.

Some of the interventions listed were clear, straightforward directions from the instructor, give examples of self, and others who have struggled and succeeded, "provided frequent, specific, and detailed feedback," and provide choice in assignments. All the intervention practices above would benefit a majority of students, not just at-risk students, and should be best practices for any instructor, but especially those teaching undergraduate classes.

Most colleges have programs that are designed to help first-year students transition from high school to college, and programs that help improve retention for at-risk students. There are some exemplary programs designed to help both but, sadly, many colleges do not implement them, and many students who need them do not know they exist. Sometimes colleges have the programs but are less than adept at identifying or reaching out to those students, or both. One noteworthy example of an excellent program is The Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) initiative – specifically the Back on Track program.

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation's (2019) report, "Connecting to Opportunity: Lessons on Adapting Interventions for Young People Experiencing Homelessness or Systems Involvement." delves into the LEAP (Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential) initiative's Back on Track program which seeks to improve education outcomes of students experiencing homelessness who were involved in the child welfare and justice systems. Sixty-eight percent of the students who participated enrolled in postsecondary education or a job-training program and 40% completed their first year. Compared to the national average of 36%, according to ACT (2010). The system starts with the Postsecondary Bridging phase, where participants are assessed

and gain postsecondary-readiness skills, including; the admissions and enrolment process, applying for and receiving financial aid, expectations for postsecondary experiences, degree and career planning, and study skills. Moves on to the First-Year Support Phase, which fosters independence and self-agency, networking, building a support system, and continued financial aid counseling. The program found that strategically partnering with various state systems such as justice agencies, schools, child welfare departments, and homeless services was key to recruitment, aligning resources, and opening access to services.

According to ACT (2010), dropout rates at the community college level for first-year students is over 50%. Does this indicate a discrepancy between students' expectations during the recruitment phase and the reality of being in college? Most schools have retention programs in place to address this discrepancy. ACT (2010) surveyed to discover what those programs were and discovered three categories of retention programs that had the most significant effect: first-year programs like University 101, academic advising with interventions for selected populations, and learning support such as tutoring and learning assistance centers or labs. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) initiated the Pathways Project (Jenkins, D., Brown, A. E., Fink, J., Lahr, H., Yanagiura, T., 2019), which shows "how community colleges could create clearer pathways to program completion, employment, and further education for all students." The Pathways Project gives eight suggestions to improve retention: meta-majors and program maps, career and college exploration and planning for all new students, redesigned advising, enhanced career, and transfer information, and improved progress monitoring and scheduling. The program suggests a separation

between career and academic field-focused majors, have paths for each major mapped out, and easy to explore in person with an advisor and on-line; advisors that are dedicated to particular majors and have systems that allow them to monitor students' progress more effectively.

After reviewing the literature on the lower retention rates of at-risk populations such as low-socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, and differently-abled, among other populations, it becomes clear that higher education institutions and academic culture need to become more flexible in their support and acceptance of at-risk students. More research needs to be done on how at-risk students persist best in higher education, and new policies like Building Guided Pathways to Community College Student Success (Jenkins et al., 2019) need to be implemented. Although there are numerous programs designed to help transitioning students, they are ineffective if colleges are not doing their best to identify these students and reach out to inform them that programs exist and are accessible. If students understood the resources they have access to and realized how accessible they are, they would be more likely to utilize the programs, and retention rates would improve. Colleges need to spend more time and energy, informing the student body of the programs they have available and how to access them. Good programs like LEAP are in place, and we need more programs like them.

Colleges want to take advantage of the growing demand for higher education in today's society. They not only gain financially, but helping educate citizens will create a more informed voter, lower the unemployment rate, decrease the number of families who need federal assistance programs, and reduce incarceration rates. Colleges should

be spending more time facilitating success than on recruiting. Educating our youth

creates a better future. Colleges need to focus more on programs that benefit society by

addressing retention rates.

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