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ABSTRACT
This issue of CURRENTS reviews some of the general findings on the dropout, and outlines approaches that have proven effective at various types of institutions in reducing dropout rates. Most of the programs examined here are aimed at early identification of the potential dropout and prevention of his withdrawal through the provision of special services. Other programs deal with "last ditch" measures by the university to keep the student in school and with efforts to retrieve the student once he has dropped out. (Author)

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PREVENTING COLLEGE DROPOUTS: A REVIEW

One of the most perplexing and persistent problems in higher education has been the dropout—the student who, for one reason or another, does not graduate from the institution in which he originally enrolled. For fifty years, it has been known that roughly 50% of each entering freshman class would not graduate. Some institutions can report losing only 30% of their entering classes; but for others, the attrition rate is as high as 70%. Regardless of the exact figure at any particular school, the statistics have provided college presidents with one of their best rhetorical ploys: anxious freshmen always sit up when told that half of them won't be around in four years.

There appears to be general agreement that dropping out of school deliberately—either for a short period or forever—can be beneficial for many students. However, many dropouts, including both voluntary withdrawals and academically dismissed students, are capable of completing college work; indeed, some of them are eminently capable in terms of their academic ability. These students waste their own talents, their possible contribution to society, and the time and resources of the university.

This issue of *Currents* will review some of the general findings on the dropout, and outline approaches that have proven effective at various types of institutions in reducing dropout rates. Most of the programs examined here are aimed at early identification of the potential dropout and prevention of his withdrawal through the provision of special services. Other programs deal with "last ditch" measures by the university to keep the student in school and with efforts to retrieve the student once he has dropped out. It is hoped that colleges and universities can use selected aspects of these successful programs to develop approaches to their own dropout problems.

Profile of the dropout

Extensive research has been conducted on the characteristics of the college dropout. In many of these studies, significant differences have been found between the dropout and the "persister." Academically, the dropout, as expected, tends to be less well prepared than the student who persists in terms of both ability, as objectively measured, and achievement, as measured by high school class rank.[1] Measurements of the ability and achievement of dropout and persisters are so similar, however, that no college can really claim that the dropouts didn't belong there in the first place. At most institutions, it would not be difficult, for instance, to match the high school academic credentials of a dismissed student with those of another student making normal progress toward a degree.

Non-intellective factors demonstrate that the student who drops out of college generally comes from a lower socio-economic background, plans initially to get a less advanced degree, and applies for relatively fewer scholarships.[2] Findings also suggest that the dropout tends to be more aloof, self-centered, impulsive, and assertive than the persister. Merigold[3] and Reboussin[4] concluded that the dropout—even when academically capable—sees himself as a relatively poor high school student. Merigold also found that the dropout worried about the lower educational level of his home, the need to make money, "...and a need for freedom to express himself." Cope[5] found a relationship between dropping out and the "presses" of the college environment—institutional characteristics that frustrate or cause anxiety within students. For example, the student interested in the social life at college might feel frustrated at an institution stressing intellectual values; conversely, the bookworm might feel miserably out of place in an environment oriented toward athletics or social events.

Anticipating the crisis

By analyzing the types of students who have withdrawn or been dismissed in the past, institutions can select new students who fit the pattern of persisters and design programs to overcome the problems of potential dropouts.

At Indiana University, this approach produced a "number of spectacular retrievals.... Stated bluntly and statistically, the failure rate [for a carefully defined portion of potential dropouts] dropped from about 95 per cent to 44 per cent." According to a report by John W. Snyder,[6] preliminary studies indicated that 95% of the Indiana freshmen, who entered with SAT verbal scores of 650 or better and ranked below the 60th percentile in high schools, had a history of failure—mostly in their first year. The preliminary study also showed that a major problem for the academically able but poorly motivated student was the fact that he saw school work as boring, purposeless, and actually beneath the level of his abilities.

For procedural reasons, it was impossible to work only with incoming students with verbal scores above 650, so all entering freshmen having verbal scores of 600 or better and ranking below the 61st percentile in high school (a total of 54 students) were invited on a voluntary basis to a special counseling session. The students were told in the invitation that their academic backgrounds indicated that they might have some special needs, that counseling would be offered on a continuing basis, and that they were free to leave the sessions at any point. Thirty-five students attended the first meeting where they were informed bluntly of their chances for survival, and warned that in the next two years they could probably look forward to some boring classes and poorly qualified instructors. Two reactions were clear: each student was surprised to see others like himself and was impressed with the candor of the discussion leaders.

Basically, the students were asked to bear with the frustrations of early college life and were offered a glimpse of truly outstanding advanced college instruction. Six meetings were held at which faculty members respected on campus for their teaching ability discussed "what the professors thought they were doing in their professional work and interests. The focus would thus be on the disciplines, not upon the students' personal problems." Most of the participating faculty had something to say about their own experiences with able but poorly achieving students.

> Each participant assumed he was speaking to a mature and able audience with some general knowledge of his field, and so passed immediately from introductory and very basic material to genuine problems.
>
> The ability to turn almost immediately to the fascinations of solving problems in research and the communication of that research allowed each participant to warm to his subject rapidly. The enthusiasm thus generated in the speaker was easily communicated to the audience. An initial ground rule had been that the presentations should be limited to one hour, and in every case the participant talked less than that before receiving questions. But also in every case, the sessions lasted from two to three hours because of interest generated among the students.... Several [students] made the general comment that the project had shown them for the first time that there was challenge indeed, based upon the acquisition of enough skill to reach the areas of problem solving, in every area presented.

Snyder concluded that the only way to attack academic attrition was to identify potential dropouts before registration, since the student may confront insurmountable academic difficulties within as little as two weeks after the beginning of classes.

It is relatively simple to select entering freshmen who are liable to encounter academic problems merely on the basis of the academic credentials they present for admission. Prediction equations based on high school work and national test scores are common, and both major admissions testing services will conduct the studies on request.

Using this approach, Beloit College adopted a policy which resulted in a favorable relationship between "admission with warning" and staying in college.[7] That is, students cautioned on admission that they may have academic problems "have less tendency to drop out than might be expected." Reboussin thought this was an encouraging sign if it meant that the warning provoked freshmen to put forth more effort than they might have, but he noted that other factors might account for the relationship.

Counseling, special courses and transferring

Another possible solution to the problems of the student identified on admission as a risk is demonstrated by Wilbur Stegman, who investigated the effects of living area activities upon retention.[8] At Southwest Missouri State College, 140 freshmen were selected on the basis of their academic backgrounds and their perceptions of the college environment, and were divided into four experimental and control groups. A graduate resident assistant was placed with each. Those assigned to experimental groups were charged with providing sufficient academic counseling, tutoring and personal counseling, and arranging for enough financial aid to keep their students successfully in college until enrollment for their sophomore year.

> The results of this study indicated that the personal attention and help given to the experimental study groups may have been instrumental in accounting for a significant...raise in persistency for the experimental students as compared to their control counterparts [a difference of 21.9% for males and 15% for females]. It was theorized that if the same percentages could be extended to an entire freshman class that as many as 248 males and 167 females might be saved from freshman attrition each year.

The graduate student residents commented that the students were interested, voluntarily dropped in for assistance, and appreciated the fact that someone was personally concerned with them.

More ambitious attacks on the attrition rate have been mounted elsewhere. Ikenberry studied the effects of reduced course loads and reading-study-skills courses—traditional approaches to solving the problems of those in academic difficulty-on 330 entering freshmen at West Virginia University who had predicted grade point averages of 1.9 or less.[9] The students were divided into four groups: Group 1 was offered a guided studies course—encompassing reading and study skills and two half-hour counseling sessions each week—and a reduced academic load; Group 2 was offered guided studies without a reduced load; Group 3 took a reduced load without guided studies; and Group 4 followed the normal curriculum taking neither guided studies nor a reduced load.

Ikenberry found that the guided studies course helped to reduce the number of dropouts *only* in combination with the reduced load. Moreover, reduction of the credit load alone appeared to hurt the marginal student more than it helped him: "withdrawal from college appeared to be accelerated by the load reduction." He concluded from this that the lighter course load might result in even less involvement in academic work and, therefore, less external pressure and internal motivation to succeed.

At Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, counseling is the core of the program to lessen attrition.[10] Flexible administrative policies have also assisted the student having academic difficulties. Allegheny students can normally count on a year in which to "hit their stride" before becoming eligible for dismissal. In addition, students having academic problems are helped to develop better study habits, choose more appropriate majors, and sophomores and even juniors are allowed to start over with fresh grade point averages so that previous cumulatives will not penalize later improvement. In this way, freshman academic attrition is held to less than 5%, and overall attrition in the first year is approximately 13%, compared to the national average of 26%.

One promising idea suggests dropping out of the "mother" institution but remaining "within the system." In 1968, Chancellor Mitau proposed that since all six Minnesota state colleges had different environments, different strengths, and different offerings, they should adopt a "Common Market" system in which students could move about freely.[11] After one year at his first institution, a student could attend another state college for a minimum of one quarter and maximum of three quarters. Ideally, if more than one quarter was spent away from the mother institution, each would be spent at different schools. At the end of the period, the student could transfer all credits back to his home institution, or transfer formally if he chose to stay at a new institution. Although similar interinstitutional arrangements exist, his suggestion was specifically aimed at reducing the dropout rate. Unfortunately, the program hasn't been in operation long enough to determine its success.

Alternative measures

Although a program focused on the period when the dropout is deciding to leave college or is about to be dismissed is probably the worst approach to reducing dropout rates, it is better than no effort at all. Even the simple technique of requiring exit interviews has proven useful at many schools. At the California State College at Long Beach, students were required to fill out a form specifying their reasons and to discuss them with a counselor. George Demos discovered in a study[12] designed to distinguish the students' real reasons for dropping out of college from their stated reasons that:

> An interesting concomitant effect of these interviews, which speaks well for the advantages of terminal interviews, was that approximately 10% of the students who were planning to withdraw decided against it as a direct result of an interview with a counselor.

Ford and Urban have outlined what is possibly the best approach to reducing attrition rates.[13] It combines procedures established at admission time to assist potential dropouts with procedures to help those students who are missed in the first program. The program is build upon two assumptions: that the gathering of data is absolutely necessary for the program's development, and that the "best match possible" between the student and his environment should be sought. The collection of data regarding the admission, retention, and academic achievement of students must be a regular ongoing process. Seeking the best match between student and environment involves pre-admission and continuing counseling so that the student can be guided before and after registration. At Pennsylvania State University, students are provided with counselors who have the authority to advise removal from a regular academic program for a period, changes in major or college within the University, or changes in residence. From initiation of the program in 1958 to 1965, the number of academic dismissals decreased from 800 students per year to approximately 200 per year. During the same period, the number of students on the Dean's List increased from approximately 500 each year to 1000. Since grading patterns appear to have remained fairly stable, the rising academic quality of entering classes should not have affected these figures. The figures are even more significant when one considers that the University was annually increasing its enrollment during this period by between 500 and 1000 students.

If all other measures fail, there are programs designed to ensure that the dropout will be more likely to succeed if he returns to college. The Educational Development Center in Berea, Ohio, is well known for this type of program. Based on his experience, Robert W. Pitcher, Director of the Center, suggests that colleges accept two fundamental assumptions in working with "flunk outs": each student fails for different reasons, and programs must be sufficiently flexible to meet these differences.[14] Pitcher recommends investigation of the motivation, aptitude, and possible personal problems of each student. Alternate "remedies" might include the improvement of language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), ability to organize time and work, and self-concept. A critical element in the Center's approach is the fact that the instructors cannot be manipulated by the students.[15] Rewards in the form of grades are not given at the Center; students, therefore, work for their own advancement and not for the instructor's approval.

Conclusions

It should be noted that the sheer size of the dropout phenomenon has led some observers to view the problem as an indication of serious deficiencies in our philosophy and system of education. Bruce Eckland[16] maintains that—given the large percentage of entering freshmen who drop out—educators should begin to acknowledge the fact that:

> Eight semesters in four years is *not* the normal progression to graduation. It is the standard or yardstick...but fewer than half of the graduates in this study were so "normal."

Dorothy Knoell[17] goes further:

> The point is made that a large percentage of our youth is in school for 16 to 20 years without a break, with no real opportunity to find their identity. A college attendance pattern is recommended which would include systematic breaks and return points, either between high school and college or during college.

Careful consideration should be given to these arguments. However, until society has come to accept the idea of deliberately interrupted study, the dropout will continue to be looked upon as something of a failure.

From the programs under consideration here, it seems essential that colleges planning to reduce their dropout rates conduct research on the characteristics of their own dropouts. One of the first problems they will encounter in this process is the definition of a "dropout," for the term encompasses the disciplinary dismissal, the student who withdraws to find himself, and the student who transfers, as well as the academic failure. Defining the term will enable each institution to decide which student group to focus upon and at what point efforts to help should be discontinued.

A great deal of attention must be placed on the institution's admissions and counseling facilities. Regarding admissions, colleges should attempt to determine which students will be frustrated by their particular environment, and, if they don't foresee changes in the campus environment, should dissuade certain students from entering it. Only institutional honesty can provide this information. Counseling should be considered in the broad sense of the overall person-to-person relationships available with faculty, administrators and counselors. Invariably, the literature demonstrates that the lack of in-depth relationships and concern contribute to the student's decision to leave. Small

colleges should be skeptical of the assumption that this type of relationship is automatically fostered on their campuses. After studying the faculty-student relationships at 13 small colleges, Arthur Chickering[18] commented: "In a nutshell, we found limited communication outside of class and limited thought and exchange of ideas in class." As for faculty advisors, "we recognize in the data those brief moments it takes for the advisor to sign the program card—and we see, for all but a small minority, very little else."

James Harvey

FOOTNOTES

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