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ABSTRACT

Factors to consider when studying attrition are: (1) the academic reasons students drop out or are suspended; (2) the institutional definitions of attrition; and (3) the procedures used to monitor the successes or failures of students. A recent University of Texas study of literacy developed at the community college included a mini-study of attrition, probation, and literacy. The major findings of this mini-study are that students on scholastic probation make an inordinate number of nonproductive grades, frequently repeat courses, frequently enroll in courses without completing the prerequisites, represent the college population as a whole, overly represent the black and Hispanic student population, and report similar problems that led them to academic trouble. They frequently are not aware of their probation status and/or do not know what it means to them academically. Those students who do acknowledge their scholastic probation standing often feel that the college has let them down. An additonal finding is that students seeking counseling and accepting placement advice are uncertain about their academic future. Studying scholastic probation in order to study attrition is a legitimate alternative to studying attrition "after the fact." (EM)

# STUDYING ATTRITION BY STUDYING PROBATION

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Studying attrition must be more than totaling the numbers of students who do not survive the college experience. It should be a thoughtful analysis of the academic reasons that they drop out of or are suspended from school. It should be a consideration of some of the assumptions underlying institutional definitions of attrition and should be an investigation of the procedures by which institutions attempt to monitor the successes or failures of their students. Such study is particularly important in light of the continuing focus upon developmental courses, upon counseling strategies for reducing attrition rates, and upon generating more rigorous academic standards (designed to reduce attrition in the long run but producing increases in attrition in the short run).

However, studying attrition has been fraught with overwhelming problems centered around institutional conceptualizations of attrition and organizational practices used to measure it. A recent University of Texas study of literacy development at the community college (funded by the National Institute of Education) investigated the literacy demands of representative samples of academic, vocational, and developmental courses; included in this larger three-year study was a mini-study of attrition, probation, and literacy. As the larger study began to uncover the unevenness (inconsistencies and contradictions) of the literacy demands across programs and across the college as a whole, it was obvious that there were stark implications in our findings for the quality of literacy development in college or in society. It was decided that we needed to look beyond individual courses or programs and to consider the role that literacy plays in students' abilities to succeed academically in school. Studying transcripts (and interviewing many) of those students who had been identified by the colleges as being on scholastic probation appeared to be a viable way to discover and describe the role that literacy played in the students' academic careers. The major findings of this mini-study--common characteristics of students who are having academic difficulties--are valuable data for developing intervention strategies aimed at reducing attrition.

## Major Findings

*Students on scholastic probation make an inordinate number of nonproductive grades.*--Grades that carry no credit and are not used in computing the GPA are "nonproductive": i.e., W's (withdrawals), I's (incompletes), and NC (no credit) are nonproductive. While Friedlander cited that over "20 percent of the grades . . . (in a given community college) are nonproductive," our analysis of these students' transcripts documented that they--individually and as a group--had amassed an unconscionably high number of nonproductive grades. (Beyond the problems that these nonproductive grades caused for students at our research sites, we found that "P" grades--intended to be indicators of progress--were often counted as F's by the receiving transfer institutions. As well, a disproportionate number of W's on the student's record negatively impressed admissions officers when they evaluated the transfer status of borderline students. Finally, I's that had not been replaced by productive grades frequently became F's on student transcripts after a predetermined point in time.)

*Students on scholastic probation frequently repeat courses.*--These students repeated some introductory courses two or three times. They rarely, however, repeated them with the intention of earning a better grade, but rather they dropped out before semester's end and re-enrolled at some future time. Repeating a course to earn a better grade typically resulted in minimal or no improvement.

*Students on scholastic probation frequently enroll in courses without completing the prerequisites.*--Dramatic numbers of these students enrolled in courses without having completed prerequisite courses. While our research data supported concerns that prerequisites did not always provide the content and skills that follow-on courses required, the fact that large percentages of students in academic difficulty shared this common enrollment trend was an important finding.

*Students on scholastic probation are representative of the college population as a whole.*--There was not an overrepresentation of former remedial/developmental students among this group. That is, the student mix included fairly equal numbers of those who had taken, or were taking, remedial/developmental work, as well as those who had not taken (or been identified) as needing such instruction. (It is important to note, however, that unless preassessment is a condition for enrollment and subsequent placement into developmental courses is re-

quired, it is difficult to assign cause-effect relationships between developmental courses and remaining in college. In other words, assessment instruments did not appear to be particularly good "predictors" of academic success--i.e., of avoiding scholastic probation.)

*Black and Hispanic students appear to be greatly overrepresented among students on scholastic probation.*

*Students seeking counseling and accepting placement advice share a common characteristic of uncertainty about their academic future.*--Students who were more certain about their academic and vocational goals saw counselors less often than did those less certain. Students more certain of their goals saw counselors only for advice about specific courses. Students less certain expected more advice and support--e.g., evaluation of skills. These students typically had poorer academic backgrounds, had GED's, or had been in vocational "tracks" in their high schools. Counselors typically advised these students to take the "basic" courses (general function courses); however, our study had determined that these introductory courses were, by and large, the most demanding in that they required higher levels of literacy skills than many entering students could demonstrate (thereby compounding the college adjustment problems that they already faced). (The fact that these courses are those most often "required" may explain some repetition of courses.)

*Students on scholastic probation report similar problems that led them to academic trouble.*--Students in academic trouble reported that their withdrawal from courses could be attributed to factors over which they had no control--e.g., illness, job-related travel, changes in working hours. As well (and we would venture to suggest most likely), the strains that work hours made on course demands affected some types of courses more than others and resulted in decisions to withdraw. For example, courses that demanded and required that students demonstrate higher levels of reading and writing (i.e., reading text, writing papers) were those most frequently dropped. As well, courses taught with an instructional style that required students to do much of the organizing of content and guessing about the content to appear on exams were most frequently dropped in the face of severe time restraints. (It is possible that dropping courses and retaking them another semester with another instructor might be a student strategy for "shopping around" for an instructional style that is more compatible with personal time constraints.)

*Students on scholastic probation frequently are not aware of their probation status and/or do not know what it means to them academically.*--Many students reported that they did not know that they had been placed on scholastic probation. If they did know, oftentimes they did not know what it meant or what it required of them; also, mistakes in compiling these lists--i.e., students incorrectly included--were rarely investigated by the student. (This is all to say that there is some need for a better system of explaining to students what scholastic probation means to them, for making certain that the student *is* in fact on probation and that he not be permitted to take courses willy-nilly without regard to the academic difficulty leading to his or her probationary status.)

Students who acknowledged their scholastic probation standing did not always see that failure to be successful in college as "legitimate." That is, they often felt that the college had let them down--e.g., the college did not assess them adequately, or did not prohibit them from entering courses for which they were not prepared, or did not give them adequate instruction in the face of their background and their academic needs, and so forth. Beyond these more general complaints, students frequently blamed specific teachers or courses, rather than a specific college or community colleges in general.

Studying scholastic probation in order to study attrition is a legitimate alternative to studying attrition "after the fact." Some institutions find that exit interviews are successful: obviously, they can be. Some find that mail surveys of students who have already left college are helpful in identifying institutional and personal problem areas for students. It is our contention, however, that interventions capable of helping students *prior* to their withdrawal and disappearance may be formulated by studying the characteristic behaviors and profiles of those students who are likely candidates for joining the ranks of college "attriters."

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For further information, see ERIC Ed 211 161.

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