ED325033 1990-09-00 "High Risk" Students and Higher Education: Future Trends. ERIC Digest.

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Table of Contents

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ERIC Identifier: ED325033
Publication Date: 1990-09-00
Author: Jones, Dionne J. - Watson, Betty Collier
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education Washington DC.| FGK28050 _ George Washington Univ. Washington DC.

"High Risk" Students and Higher Education: Future Trends. ERIC Digest.

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Attrition is a major problem for American colleges and universities, and efforts to retain students are stymied and made complex because an increasing number of enrollees fit the socioeconomic and demographic profile of "high-risk" students. This issue is critical for the nation as a whole, because the increasing enrollment of high-risk students--minorities, females, low-income, and disabled individuals--is expected to continue into the 21st century.

High-risk students have a major impact on both institutions of higher education and society in general. Specifically, attrition affects patterns of funding, planning for facilities, and the long-term academic curricula of institutions of higher education. Attrition affects the future labor market, because students are unprepared for the required roles and responsibilities.

What causes attrition and risk? The answer to this seemingly simple question is rather complex. Indeed, a number of academic, nonacademic, and related factors are associated with attrition and risk. Academically, it appears that all students do not receive equal preparation in elementary and secondary schools. Moreover, the instructional approaches used by teachers of high-risk students tend to be inefficient. On the other hand, nonacademic factors associated with attrition and risk are generated by both teachers and students. For instance, teachers' negative attitudes affect students' self-esteem. Thus, many high-risk students develop low self-esteem and begin to cooperate with systemic forces resulting in pregnancy, dropping out, and delinquency.

To achieve success among high-risk students by the 21st century, a variety of strategies must be implemented. Special retention needs of high-risk students must be identified, and simultaneously institutions must be committed to providing both financial and academic support. In addition, social support through advising and counseling from faculty, the family, and peers is a necessary part of this equation.

ARE HIGH-RISK STUDENTS AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS THE SAME?

Although the characteristics of high-risk students are sometimes correlated with those of nontraditional students, the two concepts have different denotations. The term "high risk" is a theoretical concept based on an implicit assessment of the degree of negative risk associated with the educational experience. "High-risk students" are minorities, the academically disadvantaged, the disabled, and those of low socioeconomic status. "Nontraditional students," on the other hand, is merely a reference to the changing profile of students that emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of demographic and sociopolitical change. Thus, nontraditional students typically include

older adults, minorities, and individuals of low socioeconomic status. Some nontraditional students are not high-risk students, and, conversely, some high-risk students are traditional students. By the same token, some high-risk students are also nontraditional; for example, an older (or mature) student might also be academically underprepared.

WHAT IS THEIR IMPACT ON INSTITUTIONS?

Full-time enrollments are critical to an institution's continued survival, and high levels of attrition adversely affect an institution's funding, facilities planning, and long-term planning for the curriculum. Declining enrollments, for instance, leave unused building capacity. Large numbers of part-time or academically underprepared students increase the average cost per student. Furthermore, high rates of noncompletion among others in the general student body magnify the problem. Some institutions have expanded their curricula to include special courses for their high-risk students. While some changes in curriculum have been directly related to colleges' and universities' efforts to reduce attrition, other changes have been indirect. For example, the majors that students choose and the changes they make in majors affect the development of curricula. Similarly, academically underprepared students who choose majors they perceive as less academically challenging affect the development of curricula, because as the university enrolls fewer students choosing "difficult" majors and more students choosing "easy" majors, its curriculum becomes thus shaped over time.

ARE HIGH-RISK STUDENTS TREATED DIFFERENTLY IN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY

SCHOOLS?To understand high-risk students in institutions of higher education, one must review the different experiences of students in elementary and high schools. The school curriculum seems to benefit white males and students of high socioeconomic status more than minorities, females, and students of low socioeconomic status (Reyes and Stanic 1985). For the most part, minorities, females, and students of low socioeconomic status begin their school experience with positive attitudes. But differences in race, gender, and social class often begin to emerge during elementary school and increase by high school and college. Discrimination based on class, race, and gender influences the quality and quantity of material taught in schools.

Schools are an umbrella system or organization from which discrimination and differential treatment are often meted out. Subtle forms of discrimination can serve to undermine students' self-esteem and ultimately facilitate attrition. As a result of the social stratification in society, teachers and administrators may inherit a reality that creates an aversion to high-risk, low-income, and minority students. This internalization is then reflected in their attitudes and behavior toward those students.

Many scholars have confirmed the operation of a race-based ontology in the classroom. Teachers and others tend to separate children into "good" and "bad" students, with the polarized categories often based on race/ethnicity, gender, and class. These negative attitudes may result in prejudgment or avoidance of, for example, culturally different students to the point where students receive little or no academic or personal assistance. Such negative behaviors can lead to low aspirations and low self-esteem. And low self-esteem can in time cause students to "cooperate" with systemic forces and participate in various forms of antisocial behavior.

WHAT IMPLICATIONS CAN BE DRAWN?

Students in institutions of higher education encounter risks in several forms. For example, risk might involve a higher probability of a low grade point average and/or a greater chance of not completing a college degree. It might also involve a relatively greater probability of choosing a field that is incongruent with the skills and competencies needed by the present labor market--particularly by the labor market of the 21st century. The potential for risk and attrition exists for all college enrollees, but for some subgroups, the probability of risk and attrition is extraordinarily high.
A number of causal variables interact to increase attrition and risk among particular demographic and socioeconomic populations. These variables can include academic factors (low grade point average, academic underpreparedness, for example) but could extend far beyond the scope of the academic. Indeed, each high-risk student represents the outcome of his or her individual characteristics, combined with the shaping and contouring that occurs as a consequence of a socially stratified society.

Regardless of the reason, however, attrition and risk are costly to the individual and to society, both directly and indirectly. Thus, strategies for intervention must be developed and implemented on a number of levels. Among students, high-risk students must be challenged to develop academic and nonacademic skills and competencies associated with success in college. At the institutional level, administrators, teachers, and counselors must engage in behaviors that facilitate persistence and completion of the program. In addition, institutions of higher education must make a financial commitment to high-risk students in the form of guaranteed financial assistance for the duration of their degree program. At the community level, businesses and community-based organizations have formed partnerships with educational institutions to reduce risk.

In addition to these strategies for achieving success among high-risk students, academic support services must be offered that include developing and building skills. Further, the provision of social support is vital. It can come from advisers/counselors, faculty, parents, family,and other students and peers. This framework brings together the student, the teacher, the institution, parents, peers, and the community in a dynamic synthesis.

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This publication was partially prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED RI-88-062014. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the department.

Title: "High Risk" Students and Higher Education: Future Trends. ERIC Digest.
Note: For the report on which this digest is based, see ED 321 726.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Target Audience: Administrators, Practitioners
Available From: ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, The George Washington University, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183 ($1.00).

Descriptors: Academic Failure, Academic Persistence, Dropout Prevention, Dropout Research, Educationally Disadvantaged, High Risk Students, Higher Education, Institutional Role, Potential Dropouts, Student Attrition, Student Development, Student Problems
Identifiers: ERIC Digests
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