

ED386242 1995-07-00 The Influence of Race and Ethnicity on Access to Postsecondary Education and the College Experience. ERIC Digest.

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Author: Henriksen, Janel Ann Soule

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The Influence of Race and Ethnicity on Access

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The American ideology promotes the belief that all citizens of the United States are entitled to equal educational opportunities. Hence, colleges and universities must consider the extent to which such goals are being met. Questions pertaining to how minority students attain access to postsecondary education, and the academic and social experiences these students encounter while in college, are fundamental to the goals of achieving equal educational opportunities for all students. This digest offers a focused review of current literature investigating how the goals of access and equal educational opportunities are being met for minority student populations within community colleges.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES: DEBATE SURROUNDING ITS FUNCTION

As Americans, we are raised to believe that social mobility, equal access to education, and a job for everyone is the cornerstone upon which our Nation was built. The reality is, however, that our American society is, indeed, stratified. Children and young adults living at or below poverty levels do not receive the same academic or vocational training as do people within higher socioeconomic levels. In addition, underrepresented groups are often kept from achieving those educational goals they seek.

When considering structural barriers established in the system of higher education, a large number of studies focus on the community college as contributing to minority students limited access to higher education. Clark (1960) wrote that the notion of "equal opportunity" in education is equated to the idea of "unlimited access to some form of college" (p. 570). He warned, however, that some students may lack the academic ability to pursue the intellectual paths of their choice. In this case, the community college plays an important role in helping students achieve realistic academic and occupational ends. Clark termed this the "cooling out process," where students are filtered into educational programs commensurate with their academic abilities. Students who have unrealistic personal or occupational goals must be made aware of their limitations, and with the help of a counselor, can reconsider a career or educational path more suited to their talents (Clark, 1960).

This article spawned the advent of much research into the stratifying role that the community college, among other postsecondary institutions, may play within the United States. In response to Clark's work, Karabel (1972) stated that the community college

was nothing more than a structure by which class-based separation was continued, and that tracking existed within community colleges by means of vocational education.

Since the incorporation of these two landmark articles into educational thinking, many researchers have questioned the role of postsecondary education in helping students attain their goals. Unfortunately, much of the research into these inquiries focuses on the function of the community college rather than four-year colleges and universities. An excellent summary of the many issues surrounding the efficacy of community colleges was presented by Dougherty (1994). This author stated supporters and opponents of community colleges concur that the community college has enabled more students to enroll in college at a lower cost, while prestigious institutions exercise more stringent admissions policies.

Dougherty described the "fundamentalist" arguments in support of the community college, pointing out that community colleges are within commuting distance of most students, cost less, and are more willing to accept "non-traditional" students such as high school drop outs and those with vocational goals (Dougherty, 1994). Critics, however, highlight the large gap between the number of students in two-year and four-year institutions who attain baccalaureate degrees. This gap, Dougherty explained, could exist because community college students typically come from families with lower incomes, have parents who did not attend school beyond high school, and are non-white. Further, these students often did not do well in high school and have fewer baccalaureate attainment goals (Dougherty, 1994).

In addition to socioeconomic background as being a key determinant in baccalaureate attainment, Dougherty noted that community colleges do not integrate students academically or socially as well as four-year institutions. Participation in extracurricular activities is lower at community colleges than at four-year institutions. Finally, minority and working class students, according to Dougherty, are more unsure about higher education--they want to succeed but are afraid of failing, and are reluctant to achieve academically if it means they must assimilate to the cultural norms inherent in their school (Dougherty, 1994). These institutional barriers to the attainment of academic goals have a deleterious effect on minority students.

Some recent data point to the difficulties minority students face in attaining a baccalaureate degree. The progress of ethnic minority students is lower than the progress of White students at all levels of schooling. The same holds true for minority students who wish to transfer out of community colleges and into four-year institutions. The Center for the Study of Community Colleges 1995 Transfer Assembly Study reported that only 12 percent of Hispanic and Black students transferred to a four-year college or university, compared to 23 percent of White students. The transfer rates for Hispanic and Black students were consistently lower than for White students at all community colleges, including colleges known for higher transfer rates for all students. However, in those colleges, the minority students' transfer rates were considerably

higher than the norm for their groups. At community colleges with transfer rates in the top quartile, approximately 20 percent of Black students and 24 percent of Hispanic students transferred to four-year institutions, compared to 32 percent of White students.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON ACCESS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Much has been written on the expectations families place upon their children in terms of educational goals. In many inner-city and working class communities, becoming an "adult" is often linked to gaining employment and earning money after high school, rather than continuing education after the twelfth grade (Richardson, 1990). In addition, the older son of less wealthy Hispanic families is often expected to forego education after high school, as it is his obligation to work in support of his family (Rendon and Valadez, 1993). Often, these family obligations and expectations limit students' educational choices.

Other studies address the influence of institutional barriers to academic attainment. Kanter (1990) evaluated academic testing and placement as a tool to segment students of color into low-level educational paths. Kanter found that minority students were placed in classes at the pre-college (remedial) or associate degree level more often. White students, however, were more likely to be placed in transfer-level courses.

The absence of "role models" also may make the path to higher education difficult for minority students. Williams' 1990 study found that African American students indicated the absence of a role model as a reason for not pursuing higher education. Another factor is a lack of a genuine cultural understanding of students on the part of professors (Rendon and Valadez, 1993). Faculty in community colleges are primarily Caucasian, whereas the student population is becoming increasingly diverse. Professors often have difficulty understanding the academic encouragement and directions that minority students seek, thus feel as though they are simply "lowering standards" in order to account for a multicultural campus. A lack of cultural understanding, on the part of the faculty, may make the students skeptical of remaining enrolled in a community college (Rendon and Valadez, 1993).

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY COLLEGES DOING TO OVERCOME THESE OBSTACLES?

Fortunately, educational planners recognize the importance of programs which encourage the enrollment of a widely diverse student population. Several of these plans were introduced in the AACC's Multicultural Strategies for Community Colleges (1995). Some colleges have started programs to actively recruit students to science and engineering programs (Jones, 1992). Other colleges in larger cities have implemented programs to assist minority students while they are still enrolled in high school

(California Community Colleges, 1993). Still others invite minority students to serve as peer mentors to high school seniors (Stolar and Cowles, 1992). The involvement of faculty and staff has not been overlooked. Many states, including Texas, are recruiting minority faculty and administrators with the goal of improving the multicultural climate on campus (Laurel, et al., 1991). In the Multicultural Demonstration Project at George Brown Community College, senior administrators assisted in implementing race and ethnic relations policies for the college, and began to construct effective responses to the concerns of an ethnically diverse student body (Ward, 1990). These programs are only a few of many plans destined to bolster a positive multicultural community.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The implications of research on the influence of race and ethnicity on educational access are many. Systematic isolation of minority students in two-year institutions, because of academic difficulties or financial constraints, will not assist in helping minority students attain their individual academic goals. In addition, if minority students' feelings of isolation within college campuses continue, students' motivation to remain in college will decline. Future research must not only focus on the influence race and ethnicity poses on access to education, but also on practical solutions to achieving more equitable access and on creating enriching experiences for all college students.

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