Satisfactory Academic Progress Standards: Jeopardizing Efforts Toward Educational Equity?

by
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This study evaluated the academic performance of financial aid recipients at the Southern College of Technology over a two year period after the U.S. Department of Education required that a "satisfactory academic progress" policy be imposed as a condition for receiving further financial aid. Based on the findings of this study, the author argues that the students who are academically disadvantaged are not served equitably by the "satisfactory academic progress" policy.

In 1976, the federal government regulated that a student could receive financial assistance under Title IV only if satisfactory academic progress toward a degree was being made in the students' course of study. One implication of the satisfactory academic progress policy is that there is a direct relationship between the amount of financial aid received and academic grade point average. However, major studies have shown that when the variables of age, sex, race, family income, department of enrollment, and marital status are introduced, this relationship disappears.

Bennett's (1979) study of the impact of the satisfactory academic progress policy, as developed and implemented by Cleveland State, an urban University, revealed that the vast majority of students who received financial aid completed the courses for which the aid had been given. However, among the variables studied — age, sex, race, school of enrollment, cumulative grade point average, dependency status and family income, he found not only a high representation of black students affected by the policy, but a large number of students who were enrolled in the special studies division as well.

Similar to Bennett, Nelms (1977) found that the satisfactory academic progress standards were not as effective for black students in general and black males specifically as they were for white students and black females. Additionally, Nelms found that academic performance as measured by grade point average was not significantly related to any one of the conventionally tested factors including sex, age, family income, financial need, ethnic or social background, school or division of enrollment, year in school, and marital status.

Urbach-Sjouold (1984) in a study of the effect of Pell Grant payment frequency on student maintenance of satisfactory academic progress found that frequency of

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payment had an impact on the student's maintenance of satisfactory academic progress. More specifically, she found that students who received only one payment per semester completed their studies at a much lower rate than did students who received monthly payments or two payments per semester. Further, it was found that those students most adversely affectd by the reduction in payment frequency constituted minorities and persons from low income families.

Other studies (Nichols, Ostberg, McCreight & LeMay) have examined the effects of financial aid on the academic performance of students and have consistently found that no single factor can be used to explain academic performance. However, few studies have directly addressed the issue of the utility (or lack thereof) of the federal regulatory policy of satisfactory academic progress. This study was undertaken to examine such an aspect of the federal regulatory policy of satisfactory academic progress by examining the case at the Southern College of Technology (Southern Tech) from Fall 1983 to Spring 1985.

Southern College of Technology is a suburban, coeducational, residential four-year engineering technology college located in Marietta (fifteen miles northwest of Atlanta) and is a part of the University System of Georgia. The College offers the Bachelor of Science degree and the Associate of Science degree in nine (9) disciplines and the master's degree in technical management. Of the 3800 students enrolled at the College, nine (9) percent are black and sixteen (16) percent are female. Students at Southern Tech rank third among state colleges and universities in the State of Georgia on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Approximately twenty-five (25) percent of the students at the College receive some type of financial aid and approximately fourteen (14) percent receive need-based financial aid.

In accordance with the institution's policy of satisfactory academic progress, a student's academic progress is monitored and reviewed at least annually. Students who have not met the College's criteria of satisfactory academic progress are ineligible to continue to receive financial aid.

Methodology

This research was designed to address the following question: Is there significant academic improvement of the students affected by the satisfactory academic progress policy (those students suspended from receipt of further financial aid) as measured by grade point average?

The primary methods and techniques of data analysis used in this study were accomplished through use of the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). This included cross-tabulation (to study the relationships existing between selected variables), T-test (to test hypotheses of no difference between the mean GPA of students with financial aid and students without financial aid) and the Chi-Square Test of significance (to find the significance of difference).

The population for the study consisted of 114 students who were enrolled at Southern Tech and who received financial aid during the 1983-84 and/or 1984-85 academic years. Group I represented all of the students, or 57 students, who had received financial aid during the period covered by this study and who were suspended from receipt of further financial aid until satisfactory academic progress had been achieved. Group II was an equal number of financial aid recipients who had maintained satisfactory academic progress in accordance with the institution's guidelines for receipt of financial aid and consequently were not suspended from the financial aid program.

During the 1983-84 academic year, 437 students received some type of need-based financial aid. Of this number, twenty-two (22) students were suspended from further receipt of financial aid at the end of the academic year (June 30, 1984). At the end of

the 1984-85 academic year (June 30, 1985), thirty-five (35) students from a total financial aid population of 486 students were suspended from receipt of further financial aid. These 57 suspended students constituted Group I of this study.

Approximately 500 (unduplicated number) students received need-based financial aid during the 1983-84 and 1984-85 academic years. From this unduplicated number (500) of all financial aid recipients, 57 students who had maintained satisfactory academic progress during the period covered in this study were systematically selected to comprise the sample for Group II of this study. The total number of unduplicated financial aid recipients divided by the number of students desired in the sample ($K = N/n$) formed the basis for the sample selection procedure. From an alphabetical listing of all financial aid recipients, every eighth student was selected to represent the population and, thus, became Group II.

Results

The summarized data reveals that the two groups do not differ dramatically from each other on the variables of marital status, sex, admission type, age, dependency status, family income, financial need, high school grade point average (GPA), and year in school. (See Table 1). However, viewing the variable of racial background (Table 2), significantly more white students than black constituted Group II or those not suspended from financial aid ($p < .005$). Black students accounted for more than half (56.1 percent) of the students who were suspended from receipt of financial aid; approximately three-fourths (73.7 percent) of the white students maintained satisfactory academic progress. While there is a significant difference between the two groups on verbal SAT scores (Table 3), the difference between the two groups is not significant for the math SAT (Table 4).

A close analysis of the verbal SAT score (Table 3) reveals that the mean verbal SAT score of the students in Group II (students not suspended from receipt of financial aid) is significantly higher than the mean verbal SAT score of the students in Group I or students who were suspended from receipt of financial aid ($p < .05$). Although there exists a difference in the mean math SAT score for the two groups (448 vs 485 for Group I and Group II, respectively), this difference is not statistically significant ($p > .05$).

To determine whether there exists a statistically significant difference in the cumulative grade point average of students before they were suspended from receipt of financial aid, the T-test was employed. (See Table 5). A preliminary analysis of the data reveals that of the fifty-seven (57) students who were suspended from receipt of further financial aid, forty-one (41) of the students continued in school while sixteen (16) did not return. The results of the T-test show that, at the .01 level of significance, there is no statistically significant difference in the mean GPA of the students before they were suspended from the financial aid program and the mean GPA of the students after they were suspended from the financial aid program.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that students receiving financial aid used the assistance for the purpose for which it was designed. The students who were denied financial aid were characterized by low grades and low mean verbal SAT scores. Consequently, it appears that the problems of the students who were suspended from receipt of further financial aid extended well beyond the scope of the institution's satisfactory academic progress policy. Similar to the findings of past research, this study found that socioeconomic factors, which in turn affect academic preparation to pursue college level work, appear to be a major factor in student success. Moreover, the study reveals that those students eliminated from receipt of financial aid in a subsequent year will most likely be black and have a low verbal SAT score.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To reiterate the contention of AASCU (1985), "it simply is not fair to blame the victims for the problems of our educational system." On the one hand, accountability of available funds makes for good management practices. Yet, the individual striving to rise from his/her already oppressed state should not be further burdened as a result of failures in our planning. While the American system of public education has historically attempted measures of economy/efficiency, it too has made efforts toward efficacy. It is commonly left to educational administrators at one level and to society at another to correct situations that contribute to and compound inequities in higher education. If we, however, fail in this role, a remedy will undoubtedly be sought by those victims of our faltering policy. By virtue of the fact that inequities in our educational system have been acknowledged countless times by those foremost in leadership, changes should not have to come as a result of forced pressures.

Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty during the mid 60's featured as one central goal equalization of educational opportunity. Prior to this, John Kennedy, in 1961, emphasized the need to intervene in this problem in stating, "Thousands of our young people are not educated to their maximum capacity . . . (because) many received an education diminished in quality in thousands of (school) districts . . . (yet) education in this country is the right . . . and the responsibility . . . of all." (Tiedt, 1966).

Recognizing a problem within the educational system is merely a first step; implementing measures to combat the problem must be the order if American education is to approach even a semblance of equity.

Toward the goal of equalization of educational opportunity, this paper, in conclusion, recommends an increased probationary period for students not progressing satisfactorily in their programs of study. While maintaining academic progress is crucial for any student receiving financial aid, understanding factors attributing to the lack of such progress is equally crucial. We should be careful not to err on the side of the student, particularly the student who is most vulnerable. As is, one might argue that the satisfactory academic progress regulations, to a large extent, further deny the "neediest" (academic and economic) students a fair chance to develop their capabilities. Such an argument, unfortunately, spells the putting into jeopardy of those already miniscule efforts toward educational equity.

Based on these findings, it seems that the satisfactory academic progress policy discriminates against the very people that financial aid was designed to help. Thus, one readily sees that students who are academically disadvantaged are not served equitably by the federal regulatory satisfactory academic progress policy.

The academic achievement of the student is influenced not only by receipt of financial aid but also by a combination of environmental factors. Many studies have documented the point that differences in the level and quality of education available (in the country, region or community in which one lives) as well as differential access to educational facilities (according to one's social class status, religion, race and ethnic origin) affect the educational achievement of the student. (See Sewell and Shah, for instance.) Thus, the poor, black student living in a southern, rural community has greater chances at educational stagnation than his or her middle-class, white counterpart from a northern suburb. Add to this widely known fact the situation emanating from the satisfactory academic progress policy and the student bearing the adverse sides of these variables is indeed a victim.

The finding that students not suspended from financial aid (or those in Group II) have a higher mean verbal SAT score than those suspended (Group I) is consistent with studies suggesting a direct relationship between higher scores and adherence to

school policy. Moreover, past studies have established that blacks and other minority groups have lower standardized test scores than their white peers. Because blacks tend to be concentrated among lower socioeconomic groups, the ensuing argument is that they are more likely to score lower than white students. Thus, it is socioeconomic status rather than race that actually accounts for differences in these scores. To the extent that financial aid raises (albeit to a minimum degree) one's available economic resources, it appears that black and other minority students would especially benefit (as relates to increased scholastic performance). As such, denying these students aid, seemingly, would tend to exacerbate the problem.

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Table 1

Distribution of Students by Selected Variables

	Group I (N = 57)	Group II (N = 57)
Marital Status		
Single	49 (86.0)*	47 (82.5)
Married	8 (14.0)	10 (17.5)
Sex		
Female	10 (17.5)	11 (19.3)
Male	47 (82.5)	46 (80.7)
Admission Type		
Developmental	15 (26.3)	16 (28.1)
Transfer	32 (56.1)	30 (52.6)
Regular	10 (17.5)	11 (19.3)
Age		
18-21 years	7 (12.3)	21 (37.5)
22-25 years	30 (52.6)	25 (42.9)
26-29 years	11 (19.3)	10 (17.9)
30 and over	9 (15.8)	1 (1.8)
Dependency Status		
Dependent	31 (54.4)	36 (63.2)
Independent	26 (45.6)	21 (36.8)
Family Income		
Below $ 5,000	22 (38.6)	17 (29.8)
5,000 - 10,000	12 (21.1)	6 (10.5)
10,000 - 15,000	9 (15.8)	6 (10.5)
15,000 - 25,000	7 (12.3)	19 (33.3)
Above 25,000	7 (12.3)	9 (15.8)
Financial Need		
Below $ 1,000	6 (10.5)	6 (10.5)
1,000 - 2,000	11 (19.3)	6 (10.5)
2,000 - 3,000	15 (26.3)	10 (17.5)
3,000 - 4,000	15 (26.3)	16 (28.1)
Above 4,000	10 (17.5)	19 (33.3)
High School GPA**		
1.01 - 2.00	1 (4.2)	3 (11.5)
2.01 - 3.00	13 (54.2)	13 (50.0)
3.01 - 4.00	10 (41.7)	10 (38.5)
Year in School		
1st year	13 (22.8)	6 (10.5)
2nd year	16 (28.1)	14 (24.6)
3rd year	16 (28.1)	18 (31.6)
4th year	12 (21.1)	19 (33.3)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate percent of group; totals not necessarily 100 due to rounding.

**Because not all students in each Group entered the College as Freshmen, high school GPA data was not available on the total population.

Table 2

Racial Background

	Race	
	White	Black
Group I (N = 57)	25	32
Percent of Group	43.9	56.1
Group II (N = 57)	42	15
Percent of Group	73.7	26.3
Total Number (N = 114)	67	47
Total Percent of Group	58.8	41.2

Chi-Square	D.F.	Significance	Min E.F.	Cells with E.F. 5
9.26770	1	.0023	23.500	None
10.46237	1	.0012		(Before Yates Correction)

Table 3

T-Test for Verbal SAT

	Number of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Group I	30	360.6667	82.124	14.994
Group II	29	420.0000	96.437	17.908

		Pooled Variance Estimate			Separate Variance Estimate		
F Value	2-Tail Prob.	t Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-Tail Prob.	t Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-Tail Prob.
1.38	.395	2.55	57	.014	2.54	54.95	.014

Table 4

T-Test for Math SAT

	Number of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Group I	30	448.0000	101.281	18.491
Group II	29	484.8276	72.487	13.461

		Pooled Variance Estimate			Separate Variance Estimate		
F Value	2-Tail Prob.	t Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-Tail Prob.	t Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-Tail Prob.
1.95	.080	1.60	57	.115	1.61	52.58	.113

Table 5

Paired Sample T-test - Group I
Cumulative GPA After Suspension (CUGPAA)
Cumulative GPA Before Suspension (CUGPAB)
(N = 41)

Variable	Number of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
CUGPAA	41	1.7561	.632	.099
CUGPAB	41	1.6841	.660	.103

Difference Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	Corr.	2-Tail Prob.	t Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-Tail Prob.
.0720	.207	.032	.950	.000	2.23	40	.032