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Retention of Undergraduate Minority Students in Institutions of Higher Education

Verdia Jenkins
and
Melvin Terrell

This article is concerned with the retention of minority undergraduate students, offering recommendations which contribute to a higher rate of student retention in postsecondary institutions. The first section provides a brief introduction to the state-of-the-art concerning attrition and retention. The development of a retention program for minority students comprises the second, more comprehensive section. It provides a listing of resources concerned with the problem. Concluding recommendations are presented which can contribute to the successful retention of minority students.

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The issue of student attrition in institutions of higher education has become of increasing concern since the late 1960s. With open access to many postsecondary institutions, enrollment greatly increased during the 1960s. Also, the degree of attrition increased at an alarming rate—this condition can be attributed to various factors related to students as well as to the colleges and universities.

Higher education administrators have always recognized student attrition as a problem. In the past, attrition has been partly balanced by academic planning following recruitment. As attrition continued throughout the 1970s, attempts were made to develop strategies to solve the problem. Whereas the earlier efforts to establish retention programs were concentrated upon traditional students, it became clear that more significant measures would have to be utilized to assist nontraditional undergraduates to achieve academic success. Many studies conducted during the 1970s identified variables related to attrition; once identified, the factors provided the basis for academicians to develop more comprehensive retention efforts. "Task-

forces" were developed to investigate the retention efforts on individual campuses.

A review of some attitudes relating to retention follows: In 1978, a university-wide attrition/retention study group was formed at the State University of New York at Buffalo, consisting of more than thirty people. Faculty, staff, and students were represented on the committee, and a three-person chair directed the group in the eight-month study. The tri-chairs consisted of the vice-president for student affairs, a commuter undergraduate student, and an on-campus undergraduate student. The committee's view concerning the retention problem shows that:

> College Student Retention is an issue that affects both the private and the public sectors. It is essential that educational institutions provide the personal growth experiences to satisfy the needs of the students. If the college is meeting the needs of the students, the attrition rate can be reduced.[1]

And the chair

> stated in the opening remarks that everyone concerned with higher education should be concerned with the retention of students in an attempt to help them successfully pursue their objectives in higher education.[2]

The vision remains unchanged in the 1980s.

Retention programs should begin with an identification of the contributing forces of attrition. "It is important to understand that these forces vary in type and intensity; similarly, the types of demands and forces on students vary in kind and difficulty among institutions."[3] Faculty insensitivity to non-whites and the non-use of student support services by minority students are examples of forces and problems. Identification of the issues involved is essential for defining the scope of the attrition problem.

Known criteria for retention are important for any program. First, the criteria must be compatible with the missions and goals of the institution. Second, undergraduates must have mandatory requirements for using the campus resources. Finally, the attributes of minority college students must be addressed by institutions.

Retention studies should be examined to assess the current information available. Each institution must choose techniques for developing more relevant studies, and the resultant data must be utilized throughout the campus by academic personnel and student support services. An important use of the information gathered can help establish retention guidelines, both specific and general.

Guidelines developed on campuses must take into account institutional resources. If there is any indication that existing resources are insufficient to reverse or halt attrition, additional or alternative development of resources is necessary. The awareness and commitment of the institutional community must be realized.

Past retention programs must be reviewed. Successful components of programs must be noted for further examination in relation to present retention techniques and strategies.

Developing a Retention Program for Minority Students

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1975, fifty-nine percent of black college students compared to forty-three percent of white students leave before graduating. Although the reasons for dropping-out are similar for black and white students, research findings during the past decade indicate that academic measures do not predict achievement for black college students as well as they predict achievement for white students. William Sedlacek and D.W. Webster suggest that our understanding of black youth and higher education can be enhanced by examining nonacademic predictors.[4]

In a longitudinal study conducted at the University of Cincinnati, Kathleen Burlew found that nonacademic predictors that turned out to be important fall into three categories: (1) aspirations and expectations, (2) self-perceptions, and (3) the perceptions of others. She suggests that aspirations may simply be a reflection of the exposure, or the lack of it, to certain alternatives.[5] Burlew argues for the increased exposure of black youth to higher educational and prestigious job settings so they will consider these as viable alternatives when making decisions about education and career. Although educational aspirations were important indicators of who enters higher educational institutions, occupational aspirations were important predictors of both entrance and retention. Since students may lose interest in educational goals, an occupational end is needed to sustain their motivation to continue. Also important to retention is the sense of control exercised by students over outcomes in general. Students are more likely to stay in school if they think they have control over failure and think they can use skills or credentials acquired in college to achieve personal life goals.

D. Elkind argues that black students experience several discontinuities between high school and college, including the absence in college of social promotion that is found in some high schools.[6] Furthermore, the high school culture, at least in inner-city schools, may have been dominated by a black majority, while the general

college environment is dominated by the culture of the white majority.

Financial pressure and poor study habits,[7] mistrust between faculty and students,[8] and marginal involvement in dating and social life and lack of opportunities for involvement in campus life[9] interfere with the progress of black students in colleges. Anthony DiCesare, et al., found that blacks who remain in college have more self confidence and higher expectations, feel more strongly that colleges should influence social conditions, are more apt to perceive racism in college, and are more likely to live on campus and make use of its facilities than are non-returning students.[10] Students who leave are more likely to have problems because they tend to expect less racism than they actually find.

Attrition and retention rates are also influenced by the following factors: (1) being intensely isolated or alienated in predominantly white institutions, (2) being the first generation to attend college, and (3) having the tendency of minorities to be less likely than whites to turn to "traditional counselors."[11] Student perceptions of a caring attitude on the part of the university can counteract loneliness or depression. Mandatory counseling, advising, and tutorial/study skills work are viewed by students who perform poorly as a part of institutional caring and concern that can override loneliness and depression.[12] A strong support person or "significant other" within the campus life of students is important; the person can be an advisor, counselor, faculty member, or work supervisor. If a retention program is to be successful, it must address a variety of personal needs as well as offer support and assistance in academic areas.

Andrew Goodrich makes the following recommendations for retention.[13]

1. Establish a system for determining enrollment, good standing, probation, and academic dismissal rates for each academic department.
2. Develop a system for early identification of students experiencing academic difficulty.
3. Establish a follow-up communication system for contacting students experiencing academic difficulty and those on probation.
4. Set up campus-wide academic committees for the development of strategies to enhance recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of minority students within departments.
5. Conduct a campus-wide minority retention workshop focusing on concerns identified by committees.

6. Develop a system for acquiring information on nonacademic reasons for which students leave.

Goodrich places special emphasis on the Computerized Academic Monitoring System (CAMS). The system includes instructor identification of students with a D or F grade at the end of the first one-third of the term, letters sent to students from departments or Minority Affairs Office expressing concern and indicating tutorial and advising resources available, and follow-up evaluation. The Campus Academic Monitoring System works to create a supportive environment by identifying students with academic difficulty, offering a wide range of academic support services, and providing faculty/staff follow-up. Each student is put in touch with individuals who offer assistance and *psychological support* on an ongoing basis.

The key follow-up elements of the Goodrich Model are personal contact with students, academic improvement resources, data collection, reporting, and evaluation. The advising network has two facets: sensitive, knowledgeable departmental advisors and minority peer advisors trained in peer advising. The Minority Advisement Program (MAP) includes an academic survival course to acquaint students with academic requirements, administrators, university regulations, and supportive services, so they can become knowledgeable users capable of handling system-related problems. Upon successful completion of the course, students can become peer advisors and provide general academic advising and referrals, including tutorial and financial aid. Peer advisors personally contact those with difficulty.

Although they do not ignore the importance of data collection and academic factors, Simmons and Simmons place more emphasis on the personal aspects of the retention and attrition dilemma.[14] Although their program was originally implemented in the Stevens Institute of Technology, its principles apply in other settings as well. The Stevens Technical Enrichment Program (STEP) takes a strong preventive orientation to minority student retention and attrition, beginning with a six-week bridge program of rigorous pre-freshman and freshman courses. Students must understand how the program works and carry some sense of responsibility for the program. They must be willing to respond to questionnaires, undergo tutoring, report failures early enough to avert serious consequences, and develop regular and honest study habits.

Efforts are maintained to help students to adjust to their new environment, acquire good study habits, and become familiar with the campus. In order to succeed, students need a sense of commitment, a

positive self-concept, and a high level of maturity.

The STEP program augments interviews, observations, and recommendations. The program uses a variety of evaluative instruments, including the Wren Study Habits Inventory, Mooney Problem Check List, Super's Work Values Inventory, Vocational Preference Inventory, and the California Psychological Inventory.

Central to the STEP program is an atmosphere of trust and safety. Students and staff are on an informal, first-name basis; they interact in informal social settings, and great care is taken to ensure a non-threatening atmosphere. A "buddy-system" complements the elements. Good relations with parents are established through parent associations, and STEP works with community agencies such as anti-poverty programs, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and ASPIRA of America, Inc. STEP personnel also consult regularly with community representatives in the drafting of grant proposals for federal funds.

The STEP program solicits strong institutional support through commitment to the program by the administration, from the president on down. The president holds meetings to discuss STEP and makes supportive policy statements. The development office actively solicits funds, and the dean encourages faculty and others to participate.

Favorable faculty relations are essential to the program. The Faculty Advisory Board strives to increase faculty participation, to reduce conflict between students and faculty, and to help students get the most out of courses. The Dean of Students Office helps with adjustment problems and facilitates student participation in campus activities.

STEP employs a full-time undergraduate counselor and addresses the many nonacademic reasons for students leaving school: inadequate financial aid, negative home environment, and negative neighborhood pressure. Good staff training and rapport are essential. In addition, good liaison with the Career Planning and Placement Office is maintained.

Good relations with funding agencies are carefully cultivated, including foundations and corporate sources. STEP gets forty percent of its funding from the Department of Health and Human Services and twenty-five percent from the New Jersey Department of Higher Education, with the remainder coming from private sources. Good relations with the development office ensure the coordination of fund-raising activities. The president and the STEP director make direct

visits to corporations and individuals for funds.

Summary

The research findings present several models for improving the academic and nonacademic development of minority students in higher education. The possibilities are summarized:

1. Universities need to develop seminars to raise the ethnic awareness of white faculty and administrators.
2. Orientation programs must provide the necessary academic survival techniques for success.
3. Academic counselors must be trained in cross-cultural counseling.
4. Some type of monitoring and referral program that has the cooperation of faculty and student development personnel must be implemented to reduce the academic dismissal rate.
5. Developmental courses must be taught by faculty who are interested in and concerned about minority students.
6. Universities must demonstrate a commitment to funding programs that assist students in their efforts to graduate.
7. A peer counseling program can be beneficial in meeting the academic, cultural, and social needs of minority students.
8. In addition to academic advising and tutorial services, a successful retention program must address the personal and social needs of minority students.
9. A supportive network of caring counselors, advisors, tutors, faculty, and peers is essential; such a close, supportive relationship is critical for those students whose families and neighborhood backgrounds do not provide the motivation to continue in the face of adversity.

Recommendations

In order to formulate workable recommendations, the writers made an attempt to gather as much information about retention efforts as possible. Since both authors are familiar with various methods for developing undergraduate student retention programs as well as minority student retention plans, the recommendations are applicable to both variables. Through the process of incorporating first-hand knowledge with the data compiled from the literature, the writers are comfortable with the ideas presented. We concluded that there are three areas common to most or all institutions of higher education; therefore, our recommendations are clustered within the areas of environment, faculty and staff, and students.

Environment

Pre-admission— Develop orientation programs designed to inform and relate to those being recruited. For the minority student, open communication can make the difference in the perception of the academic environment.

Admissions— The procedures should reflect the institutional effort to provide prompt and effective information and assistance. Advisors who are sensitive to specific problems concerning minority student admission can create a supportive environment. The admission process must set the tone of the academic environment.

Enrollment— Students must have all of the information concerning enrollment. There must be open access to interpretation of this information. For the minority student attempting to complete the process, the availability of on-site assistance is invaluable.

Financial Aid— The availability of financial aid must be made known and information compiled. The compilation may prove complex; therefore, to relieve the frustration caused by the complexity, support must be available. Minority students often respond to the absence of clarity in these matters with confusion.

Courses— Establish a system which provides assistance in course selection, course-related problems, and grades. The continuous institutional commitment to minority students' academic endeavors provides a caring environment.

Faculty and Staff

Develop programs designed to focus upon retention with emphasis on minority students. In order to encourage faculty and staff participation, they must be made aware of concerns affecting attrition and retention. To address issues that are nonacademic, institutional personnel must have access to information showing the relationship of nonacademic problems to attrition. Faculty and staff must reflect the composition of the student body. If the purpose is retention of minority students, there must be a simultaneous effort in recruitment and retention of minority faculty and staff. Successful in-roads into halting minority student attrition must be shared with faculty and staff.

Students

Responsibilities should be clearly communicated to students. Pertinent information must be available to advisors and counselors to assist the students. Minority students' access to faculty and staff facilitates the perception of support. Support of minority students must include tutorial assistance, referral services, minority role models, and so forth. In the final analysis, it is up to students to complete course work, obtain good grades, and be responsible for themselves;

doing this successfully, however, depends upon the institutional support available.

The recommendations presented are not intended to be all inclusive. They are offered as ideas to be shared and debated with those involved in the retention of minority students.

Notes

[1]James T. Closson, Doris Hill, and Lee Noel. "What Works in Student Retention?" *College and University*. 56 (Summer, 1981) 336.

[2]Sunny L. Low, et al. "Registrar's Office: Impact on Retention." *College and University*. 56 (Summer, 1981) 402.

[3]Eddie W. Morris, Edward Anderson, and Shirley Dorsey-Martin. "Realities of Retention: A Program That Works!" *College and University*. 56 (Summer, 1981) 319.

[4]William E. Sedlacek and D.W. Webster. *Admission and Retention of Minority Students in Large Universities*. ERIC ED 139 889 (College Park: University of Maryland, 1977).

[5]Kathleen H. Burlew. *Black Youth and Higher Education: A Longitudinal Study*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 181 100 (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1979).

[6]D. Elkind. "From Ghetto School to College Campus: Some Discontinuities and Continuities." *Journal of School Psychology*. 9 (1971) 241-245.

[7]F. Westbrook, J. Miyares, and J. Roberts. "Perceived Problem Areas by Black and White Students and Hints about Comparative Counseling Psychology." *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. 25 (1978) 119-123.

[8]C.U. Willie and A.S. McCord. *Black Students at White Colleges*. (New York: Praeger, 1972).

[9]John A. Centra. "Black Students at Predominantly White Colleges: A Research Description." *Sociology of Education*. 33 (Summer, 1970) 325-339.

[10]Anthony C. DiCesare, et al. *Non-Intellectual Correlates of Black Student Attrition*. (College Park: Cultural Study Center, University of Maryland, 1970).

[11]Sedlacek and Webster.

[12]Robert A. Kaye. "A Required Counseling-Study Skills Program for Failing College Freshmen." *Journal of College Student Personnel.* 13 (March, 1972) 159-162.

[13]Andrew Goodrich. *Developing a Data-Driven Retention Model for Improving Minority Student Persistence in Predominantly White and Historically Black Colleges.* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

[14]Ron Simmons and C. Maxwell-Simmons. *Principles of Success in Programs for Minority Students.* (Hoboken, NJ: Stevens Institute of Technology, 1978).

Critique

Increased retention of minority undergraduates is a goal that can be supported for a variety of reasons, from the avoidance of human waste, to concern for balanced institutional budgets, to the desirability of turning out larger numbers of minority graduates who will become professional role models for the next generation. The authors have presented a state-of-the-art review of some promising retention programs, together with recommendations for strengthening such programs.

The changes in student recruitment pools since the open access period of the 1960s have been, reasonably enough, accompanied by changes in institutional strategies for retention of these diverse groups. As a significant proportion of the "non-traditional" student body, minority students have been the focus of special concern and of programs growing from that concern, since their attrition rates have been higher than those for white students. The nature of these retention programs, the authors argue, must reflect the mission and goals of the institutions housing them, for each educational institution brings forces and demands of a particular type and strength to bear on its students.

Despite these institution-specific stresses, there are, it would seem, relatively universal predictors of minority attrition. The authors summarize the characteristics of several program models developed from these predictors and present recommendations in the areas of the environment, the faculty and staff, and the students which build