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# A Follow-Up Study of Students Exiting New Dominion School

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New Dominion Students

A Follow-Up Study of Students Exiting  
New Dominion School  
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Longwood College

This thesis has been approved by:

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Running head: NEW DOMINION STUDENTS

Abstract

The research of the past two decades has resulted in a proliferation of information regarding the various reasons for dropping out of school and the characteristics of dropouts. Little has been done, however, to examine the life outcomes of those who have dropped out, or of how various treatments effect those outcomes. This is also true for those youth who are still in school, but who have become academically disengaged. The purpose of this study was to gain information regarding the life outcomes of students who attended a wilderness, residential treatment school called New Dominion. Questionnaires were mailed to 350 former residents. Each subject was asked to provide demographic information, as well as information regarding his life outcomes (i.e. education and employment experiences, and social involvements). A total of 55 usable questionnaires were returned. The results of the survey indicate that participation in the program at New Dominion appears to have had a positive effect on the life outcomes of the subjects.

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**A Follow-Up Study of Students Exiting**

**New Dominion School**

Over the past decade, the effectiveness of the educational system has received much criticism. One of the main areas of concern is the dropout rate. The dropout rate is important because it is used as an indicator of the success of special and regular education programs. At 12% (U.S. Department of Education, 1992), the current dropout rate for all persons 16 to 24 years old is the lowest that it has ever been. This overall figure can be misleading, however, because it overlooks subgroups within the total population. For example, the current dropout rate for special education students is 27% (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Dropout rates also tend to vary with regard to social group and school system. "Dropout rates are higher for members of racial, ethnic, and language minorities, for men, and for persons from lower socioeconomic status" (Rumberger, 1987, p. 108). Rates also tend to be highest in central cities and lowest in suburban areas. Rural areas fall somewhere in the middle (Howley & Huang, 1991).

Many programs have been implemented in response to the dropout problem. Some programs are preventive in nature, while others are re-entry programs for youth who have already dropped out of school. Few of these programs have been formally evaluated (Clark, 1987; Orr, 1987). The lack of research concerning these programs and the



lack of information concerning longitudinal outcomes for special education dropouts (Karpinski, Neubert, & Graham, 1992) clearly indicate that further research is necessary.

Researchers have indicated that the students who graduate from high school have more positive life outcomes than students who dropout (Karpinski, Neubert, & Graham, 1992). Life outcomes can be delineated in two areas: (a) continuing education and/or employment experiences and (b) social involvements. Hendrick, Macmillan, and Balow (1989) state that the ultimate test of the importance of schooling is its impact on students' subsequent quality of life. Quality of life can be observed in individuals' life outcomes. If this is true, what impact do schooling and/or alternative programs have on the life outcomes of students who drop out? Much of the research on dropouts has focused on the characteristics of dropouts, the causes of dropping out, and possible programs or interventions for dropouts. Research on the personal and social consequences of dropping out is limited to only a few studies (McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci, & Davis, 1992).

#### The Relationship Between Dropping Out and Life Outcomes

What is known about the relationship between dropping out and the pursuit of continuing education? Continuing education is generally regarded as enrollment in a vocational technical institute, community college, or four-year college. Studies have shown that

prior to exiting school, dropouts had been engaging in activities which severely limited their academic performance (e.g., Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). Such activities included: students expending less effort and being less engaged in their education, which resulted in their spending less time on homework; paying less attention in class; and cutting class more frequently. Although graduation does not necessarily mean that students are any better prepared for successful employment or continuing education, dropping out generally guarantees that they are not well prepared for employment. Furthermore, studies have confirmed that on the average, dropouts have lower academic skills than graduates (Alexander, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985).

Despite the fact that dropouts appear to be less academically prepared for continuing education than peers who finish school, recent studies have indicated that some are returning to school. In a longitudinal study conducted by Peng and Takai (1983), shortly after dropping out, "about 51 percent of males and 55 percent of females felt that leaving school was not a good decision" (p. 9). Furthermore, during this same period, about 25% of the male and 17% of the female dropouts participated in some type of training program outside of regular school and 14% of male and 9% of female dropouts participated in the General Educational Development (GED) program.

Kolstad and Owings (1986) conducted a study of 1980 high school sophomores who later dropped out of school and found that by 1984, 38% of those students had earned a regular or equivalent high school diploma. Similarly, in a 1985 survey, Kirsch and Jungeblut (1986) found that approximately 50% of American youth who dropped out of school had studied for the GED and 40% of those had obtained the GED. Although this research indicates that some dropouts are seeking to improve their academic skills, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

Because of their lower level of educational attainment, dropouts have difficulty finding steady, well-paying jobs. According to Young (1983), in the fall of 1982, the majority of dropouts from the 1981-1982 school year had unemployment rates almost twice as high as their peers who graduated. In general, dropouts tend to lack the skills and attitudes necessary for success in the work place. As a result, they are more likely to suffer from periodic losses of employment. When they do find work, it is usually the kind that requires little skill or training, jobs that are rapidly disappearing from the job market. On the job, dropouts are generally less productive than workers who have completed high school. These statistics apply not only immediately after they drop out, but also

for the duration of their lives. As a result, dropouts earn less income over their lifetimes than do their graduating peers (Catterall, 1985, 1988; Grossnickle, 1986; Levin, 1972).

In the first in-depth study regarding the employment costs of dropping out, Levin (1972) estimated lifetime incomes for graduates and dropouts based on 1969 data. His figures indicated that a student who dropped out after less than eight years of schooling, from age eighteen on, would earn roughly 40% less over his lifetime than his graduating counterpart. The entire population of males 25-34 in 1969, who had failed to complete high school, lost a total of \$237,000,000,000 of income over their lifetimes.

In an update of the study by Levin, Catterall (1985) calculated the income figures for the high school class of 1981 and compared them with the figures for the class of 1968. The nongraduate from the class of 1968 could expect to earn \$74,000 less than the 1968 graduate over the course of his/her life, while the 1981 nongraduates could expect to earn \$260,000 less than the 1981 graduates over the course of their lives. Catterall also recalculated these figures using a 25% income reduction to allow for ability differences and a 36% income increase to compensate for those who would complete their educations at a later date. The adjustments reduced the figure for 1968 dropouts to \$56,000 and the figure for 1981 dropouts to

\$195,000. Even these reduced figures indicate that the economic outcomes for dropouts are far less attractive than the outcomes for graduates.

Occupational outcomes for dropouts also tend to influence their social involvement. Studies have indicated that due to their decreased earning power, dropouts will at one point or another require some type of government assistance in obtaining food, shelter, medicine and other services. Dropouts also tend to have a higher incidence of illness and are much more likely to be involved in delinquent or criminal activities (Catterall, 1985, 1988; Levin, 1972).

In a recent study, McCaul et al., (1992) found that dropouts consume significantly more alcohol than graduates. They are also less likely to be socially/politically involved. In addition, dropouts participate less often in church/trade organizations and they are not as well informed about political issues as are graduates. Dropouts are less likely to engage in political discussions and fewer dropouts are registered to vote. Even when they are registered to vote, they are less likely to cast a ballot (Catterall, 1985; Levin, 1972). McCaul et al. (1992) summed up the effect of dropping out of school on personal and social measures as follows:

Our findings lend support to the concern that dropping out may result both from an alienation of adult norms and

values as well as contribute to an alienation from society at large. Our results also raise the concern that dropping out has a deleterious effect on later citizenship practices and participation in a democratic society (p. 204).

Special Education Graduates Have Less Satisfactory Life Outcomes

If the dropout in general faces poorer outcomes than the graduating student, what outcomes are faced by the population of students in special education? Students in special education who graduate already have less satisfactory outcomes than their non-handicapped peers who graduate. They have higher rates of unemployment, lower wages, and work fewer hours in low skill jobs (Hasazi, Johnson, Hasazi, Gordon, & Hull, 1989).

In 1987, Edgar and Levine completed a longitudinal study on special education graduates. They collected data on the employment rates, salaries, educational status, overall status, and living arrangements of special education students who graduated or aged out of school from 1984-1986. They found that six months after graduation, the employment rate for nonhandicapped students was approximately 75%, while the employment rate for handicapped students was about 45%. At six months post-graduation, 23% of the nonhandicapped students and 23% of the students with learning disabilities were earning minimum wage. By 30 months, 28% of both

groups were earning minimum wage, while the percentage of students with behavior disorders who were earning minimum wage dropped from 20% to 0%.

The figures for the educational status and overall status of post-graduate students with disabilities also showed similar trends. Six months after graduation 48% of nonhandicapped students were enrolled in some type of secondary education program as compared to 34% of students with disabilities. The percentages of students who were not working, attending postsecondary education programs, or engaged in any type of formal activity at six months, were 8% for nonhandicapped and 33% for students with disabilities. By 30 months, the nondisabled students, the sensory impaired students, and the students with learning disabilities were unengaged at a rate of about 20%, while the percentage of unengaged students with behavior disorders increased from 10% to 82%. Six months after graduation, independent living conditions were experienced by about 33% of students without disabilities and roughly 18% of students with disabilities. By 30 months, the nondisabled students and sensory impaired students were living independently at a rate of 55%, while the rate of independent living for the group of students with learning disabilities had increased from 18% to 40%.

The most comprehensive study concerning the transition and life experiences of secondary and postsecondary students with disabilities

is the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NTLS). Since 1987, NTLS has been gathering information regarding secondary special education students, their academic experiences, and their postsecondary life outcomes. The study defined a youth's transition to adulthood in three stages: (a) secondary school performance, (b) secondary school completion, and (c) postsecondary engagement in education or training, work, or other productive activities (Wagner, 1989, 1991a, 1991b; Wagner, Newman, D'Amico, Jay, Butler-Nalin, Marder, & Cox, 1991).

Regarding secondary school performance, youth with disabilities were found to be less academically successful than their nondisabled peers. School completion data indicated that of students with disabilities, 56% exited school by graduating, 32% dropped out, 8% aged out, and 4% were suspended or expelled. Seventy-five percent of those who graduated received a regular diploma (Wagner, 1989, 1991a, 1991b; Wagner et al., 1991).

Within two years of exiting school, 14% of these students returned to some type of educational setting. This number jumps to approximately 23% for students out of school 2 to 3 years, but it is still significantly lower than the figure for the general population at that time (i.e., 56%). Even when the results were adjusted for demographic differences, nondisabled youth were found to continue their education at a rate 2 1/2 times that of disabled



students. Youth with disabilities who graduated from high school continued their education at a much higher rate than those who did not (i.e., 21% vs. 6%). These students were much more likely to attend school on a part-time basis, and generally earned grades that were significantly lower than their nondisabled classmates. The most frequently chosen school setting was the vocational/technical school (i.e., 9%), followed by the 2-year or junior college (i.e., 4%) and the 4-year college or university (i.e., 1%) (Wagner, 1989; Butler-Nalin & Wagner, 1991; Wagner et al., 1991).

What about disabled youth who chose paid employment as opposed to continuing education? The study found that youth with disabilities were employed at a rate that was significantly less than that for nondisabled youth (i.e., 46% vs. 59%). Despite the lower figures for employment rate, the study did indicate a positive trend for the long-term employment prospects of youth with disabilities. Over a two-year, post-graduation period, employment rates of disabled youth increased steadily. The rate of pay and occupational distribution for male youths with disabilities was similar to that for all nondisabled youth. Youth with disabilities who had been out of school for more than one year earned an average of \$4.35 per hour. Twenty-one per cent of these youth were earning more than \$5.00 per hour, while 12% were earning less than \$3.00 per hour.

Despite a notable discrepancy in employment rates for disabled and nondisabled youth, the difference in their rate of pay was not that significant (Wagner, 1989; D'Amico, 1991).

Although education and/or paid employment are the most commonly chosen paths for graduates with disabilities and nondisabled graduates, some graduates do not choose either. Wagner (1989) pointed out that graduated youth may pursue other productive activities such as volunteer work, marriage and/or parenthood, or job training programs not affiliated with postsecondary educational institutions. NLTS data indicated that between graduation and 2 years post-graduation, a small percentage of students (6%) were married or living with someone of the opposite sex. Between 2 and 4 years postgraduation, the previous figure increased to 17% (Newman, 1991). During their first postgraduation year, only 6% of all youth with disabilities achieved independent living status. The majority of youth with disabilities live with a parent or legal guardian well past their graduation date. However, NTLs data indicated a steady increase in independent living status over time. For example, the figures show that by 3 to 4 years postgraduation, 36% of youth with disabilities were experiencing independent living arrangements (Wagner, 1991a, 1991b; Wagner et al., 1991).

What percentage of youth with disabilities participate in productive postsecondary activities? Jay (1991) determined that

1 to 2 years after exiting secondary school, 69% of students with disabilities were engaged in productive educational or work activity outside the home, while 23% were not. By the time these students had been out of school for 3 to 4 years, the figure for those engaged in productive activities increased to 76%. Those youth who were not engaged were found to be less socially active and more inclined to spend the majority of their time in recreation, visiting friends, or "hanging out". One out of five disabled youth who were nonengaged were looking for work (Jay, 1991).

Youth who spent more time with friends were more likely to be expelled from school, fired from a job, or arrested. NTLIS data indicate that for youth with disabilities, 9% had been arrested while they were secondary students, while 19% had been out of school for up to 2 years when arrested. Categorically, youth classified as emotionally disturbed were the most likely to be arrested, followed by youth with learning disabilities. Overall, youth who had been arrested were more inclined to spend time with friends and less inclined to participate in organized school or community groups. In addition, youth with disabilities who had been arrested were more likely to have been absent from school, to have received poor or failing grades, and to have dropped out of school as opposed to graduating (Newman, 1991).

The NTLIS data also indicated that students with disabilities were twice as likely as their nondisabled peers to drop out of school. Even when the sample was narrowed to compare students with similar demographic characteristics, students with disabilities were still more likely to drop out of school. The highest dropout rate was among students labeled emotionally disturbed (i.e., 55%), followed by students with learning disabilities (i.e., 36%). Among the major reasons for dropping out were academic failure and a dislike of school. In addition, it appeared that once students had dropped out, they were not likely to resume their education within 2 years (Wagner, 1989, 1991a, 1991b; Wagner et al., 1991).

#### Life Outcomes of Disabled Dropouts

Studies have indicated that in general, dropouts have less satisfactory life outcomes than graduates. Until recently, however, few studies have examined the life outcomes of students with disabilities, regardless of their academic status. The NTLIS is the first comprehensive study on this issue, although since it began several smaller studies have been initiated. These studies have shown that graduates with disabilities fair more poorly in life than do their nondisabled peers; however, little is known about the life outcomes of dropouts with disabilities (Karpinski et al., 1992).

No studies comparing dropouts with disabilities to nondisabled graduates/dropouts are available; however, there are some studies

which indicate that dropouts with disabilities are less successful at finding gainful employment than are graduates with disabilities (Fardig, Algozzine, Schwartz, Hensel, & Westling, 1985; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Zigmond & Thornton, 1985). In 1987, Edgar conducted a study on the employment rates of graduates and dropouts with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances six months after they exited school. His data showed that students who dropped out were half as likely to be employed as those who graduated.

#### Defining Dropouts: Do They Always Exit the School System?

All available information suggests that youth who drop out of school will experience less satisfactory life outcomes than those who graduate. They will also be less productive members of society and a drain on the welfare and criminal justice systems (Levin, 1972). Therefore, society's best course of action is to identify these youth and to provide services to keep them in school or to provide remediation once they have dropped out of school. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to: (a) define the population of "dropouts", (b) use that definition to identify characteristics of potential dropouts, and (c) intervene.

Currently, no set definition exists for determining what a dropout is, nor does a standard formula for calculating the dropout rate exist (Rumberger, 1986). Frase (1989) indicates that we may

define dropouts in three ways and thus calculate the dropout rate: 1) event dropout figures, 2) status dropout figures, and 3) cohort dropout figures. Event dropout figures measure the proportion of students who drop out in one year, while status figures measure the proportion of a specific population who have not completed school and are not enrolled at the time in question. Cohort figures measure the proportion of a single group over a period of time. Depending on the agency or study, any one or more of these methods may be used to determine dropout rate. Each one may also have its own definition for what a dropout is.

According to Hoffman (cited in MacMillan, Widaman, Balow, Borthwick-Duffy, Hendrick, & Hemsley, 1992), thirty state agencies currently define a dropout as a student who has been enrolled in the previous school year, but was not enrolled at the beginning of the current year. In addition, the student has not: graduated, completed a state- or district- approved educational program, transferred to another school either public or private or state- or district- approved educational program, been temporarily suspended, been ill, or died. Although this definition will include the dropout who has physically exited the educational system, Solomon (1989) suggests that there is another type of dropout who remains in the system. He defines these dropouts as students who remain in school but disengage from pursuing academic credentials.

In "Dropping Out of Academics: Black Youth and the Sports Subculture In a Cross-National Perspective," Solomon (1989) points out that black students are remaining in school longer, but are still not graduating. They do not earn the necessary credits for graduation because they have become academically disengaged. He believes that this is the result of black male youths shifting their main priority from gaining an education to becoming proficient in sports. He suggests that black youth are preoccupied with sports for several reasons: (1) due to the overemphasis of some schools on athletics; (2) as a means of validating their black identity; and (3) as a way of emulating black professional athletes covered by the media.

Are these "in-school" dropouts confined only to the population of black students? If young black males are emulating professional athletes to the exclusion of academics, is it possible that a percentage of all students have disengaged from academics in the pursuit of fun, acceptance, identity, notoriety, or material possessions? What becomes of these students once they disengage from academics? Do they become reinterested in learning and graduate or obtain a GED? How many exit the educational system because they finally drop out or age out of school? What are their life outcomes once they exit the educational system?

Once students disengage from academics, they generally get into trouble in school, their community, or both. As a result they may

be sent to an alternative school designed to help them with their problems. One type of alternative program available is based on experiential therapy. The most notable program of this type is Outward Bound. According to Stich (1983), Outward Bound "consists of a series of prescribed physical and social tasks, where stress, uncertainty, and the need for problem solving, communication, and immediate judgment are present" (p. 24).

Although a large body of research supports the effectiveness of Outward Bound, little information is available on similar, smaller programs. The purpose of this study is to obtain information about the success of students who enroll in a program similar to Outward Bound. The program in question is a small private facility named New Dominion School, Inc.

New Dominion School, Inc.

New Dominion School, Inc. is a year-round, residential academic and treatment program. It serves boys between the ages of 11 and 18 who have emotional, behavioral and/or academic problems. Students may be referred to the program by juvenile and social services, public schools, or mental health professionals. The school also accepts private referrals. New Dominion's goal is to develop or increase a student's self-confidence and self-esteem to the extent that he exits the program a more responsible and productive member of society.



The program is comprised of four areas: (a) academics, (b) peer group experiences, (c) individual counseling, and (d) family involvement. The School is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and is a member of the Virginia Association of Independent Special Education Facilities (VAISEF). It provides academics as well as vocational training. Teachers work with students on a one-to-one basis, providing individualized instruction that allows students to work at their own level and pace. Once in school, students may elect to pursue one of the following courses: (a) completing remedial work designed to help them increase their skills to grade level, (b) earning a GED diploma, or (c) graduating from New Dominion High School.

Students live in groups of approximately ten boys, along with two full-time resident counselors per group and other support staff. The group provides a highly structured therapeutic environment in which students receive both peer-group feedback and individual counseling. Students in a group must work together to design, build, and maintain their campsite and the structures in which they live. They also must plan weekly schedules of projects and activities. Trips and special outings provide the opportunity for building stronger relationships and for enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem.

Family involvement is also an important part of the program. Family workers and staff meet with family members and referral agencies on a regular basis to assess student progress. Reports from students' treatment team group and teachers are sent home on a quarterly basis. In addition, a special day is set aside every October for parents to come to the school, visit their children, and meet the staff and teachers. The day involves food and games, but parents also get the chance to visit the school and campsites to see their children's work.

Entrance into the program is based on a review of information such as a psychological assessment, educational materials, and a family history, that should be provided by the referring agency. On-site interviews are used to further determine an applicant's compatibility with the program. Upon enrollment, the student decides on three relevant goals and commits to work on those goals as steps in preparing to re-enter his home and community in a positive manner. A student may request and earn his Crest when his peer group and supervisory staff feel that sufficient progress has been made on these initial goals.

The Crest, which is given in the form of a patch, signifies that a student has accepted his need for change and is ready to begin working towards developing more positive attitudes and behaviors. A student who earns his Crest also earns certain privileges. He

is now permitted to travel about campus by himself, to request a first hour in the formal academic school, and to begin periodic visits home. Based on his growth in the group and his performance in this first hour, a student may earn up to five hours in school at a rate of one hour every four weeks.

Students may terminate (i.e. exit) the program at New Dominion for any one of several reasons. They may: (a) change their behavior to the point that they are ready to "terminate successfully", (b) exit due to funding cuts, (c) exit due to illness, or (d) stagnate or fail to grow in the program and, therefore, "terminate unsuccessfully." Staff and teachers at New Dominion hope that youth who come into contact with the program will return to their communities and schools as successful individuals.

Currently, seven studies involving students who have participated in New Dominion's program have been conducted by Dr. Verda Little. The purpose of three of the studies was to determine the effectiveness of the program with regards to post-treatment court contacts and consumer satisfaction (Little, 1991a). The purpose of the other four studies was to determine the degree of academic achievement attained by students during their stay at New Dominion (Little, 1980, 1983, 1987, 1991b). None of these studies attempted to find out about the range of life outcomes for students who have exited the program. The purpose of this study is to address the following

questions: (1) What becomes of students who do not complete the program? (2) Of the students who obtain GED's or graduate, what life outcomes do they experience? (3) Do the students who return to school graduate, age out or drop out? (4) What are their living arrangements? and (5) Do they find gainful employment once they exit the program?

Method

Subjects

Initially, the population for this study was the group of students who exited the program at New Dominion between October 7, 1986, and October 7, 1992. During that six-year period, 276 students exited the program at New Dominion. Of those students, four are deceased, and five were selected to be field-test subjects. This resulted in a total population of 267 students. As New Dominion is an all boys school, the population is also all male. The sample for the study was selected from that population. As the minimum sample size for descriptive research is 15% of the population, questionnaires were mailed to 100 former students (approximately 37% of the population), whose names were chosen randomly from the list of terminated students.

Due to the limited number of initial responses after the first mailing, the population had to be increased to include students who exited New Dominion from October 7, 1986, to May 26, 1994. This increased the population size to 359 students. In order to obtain a 15% sample, surveys were sent to the entire population. Fifty-five surveys were received, making the sample 15.3% of the population.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire (see Appendix A). The first half of the questionnaire was designed to gather general information about the current status of the sample. Respondents were asked questions regarding their living arrangements, educational/vocational attainment, and their marital status. The second part of the questionnaire asked specific questions regarding the post-termination educational experiences of the respondent. The purpose of this section was to determine whether New Dominion affected the academic experiences of terminated students, and whether the experience affected their life outcomes. In order to elicit specific answers, the questions on the survey were presented in either a multiple choice and/or open-ended format.

Once the questionnaire was developed, copies were given to selected staff at New Dominion to elicit reactions and feedback. The survey was also field-tested for coherence and to verify content validity. To do this, a sample of five alumni was randomly selected from the pool of exited students. These alumni were contacted by phone and asked to listen to the survey and comment on its coherence and the relevance of its questions. Although some found it difficult to visualize the survey over the phone, no suggestions for

improvements were made. However, one of the respondents made the suggestion that graduate school be added to the choices on the current status section of the survey.

#### Procedure

Once the sample was selected, addresses were obtained and the questionnaires were mailed. A cover letter and a stamped, self-addressed envelope were included with each survey (see Appendix B). The cover letter briefly described the purpose and nature of the survey. It also assured the recipient that his participation in this study would be voluntary and that all information received would be kept strictly confidential. The subjects were asked to return the survey within 10 days. After three weeks, follow-up postcards (see Appendix C) were mailed to the subjects requesting that they return their completed survey and thanking them if they had already done so.

#### Data Analysis

The first section of the survey was designed to gather general information regarding each subject's stay at New Dominion and his current life outcomes. Questions one through three asked the respondent's age at enrollment and length of stay at New Dominion School, and his current age. Because many of the subjects were unable to recall accurately their enrollment age or length of stay, the data for the first three questions was taken directly from the

school's files. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze all data. The mean, median, mode, and range were calculated for each set of data, as well as percentages.



Results

Demographic Information

From the first 100 surveys mailed, 12 (12% of the total sample) were returned that were usable surveys; therefore, one hundred more students were randomly selected and the procedure was repeated. This mailing increased the total response to 29 (14.5% of the total sample). As the sample was still under the desired 15% response rate, the procedure was repeated with the 67 remaining members of the population. This resulted in a total return of 33 usable surveys (12.3% of the total population).

At this point, the exit date for the population was increased by roughly two years, adding another 92 students to the sample. This procedure was repeated with all of the added population. Twenty-two additional usable surveys were returned, bringing the total to 55 (15.3% of the total population). In addition to receiving the 55 usable surveys, this researcher was also contacted on behalf of 15 other members of the population. Contact was initiated by parents, social workers, and parole officers. Of these proposed subjects, one was deceased, three had been transferred to psychiatric facilities for more specialized care, and two were in detention. The remaining nine letters came from parents who no longer knew the

whereabouts of their children. As these surveys were not completed by the subjects themselves and were often incomplete, they were not included as part of the data.

The mean, median, mode, and range were calculated for each set of data (see Table 1). The average age at enrollment was 15 years, 6 months. Thirteen percent ( $n=7$ ) of the subjects were between 17 and 19 years of age, 53% were between 15 and 17, and 35% were between 12 and 15 years of age when they enrolled in the school. New Dominion accepts students who are between the ages of 11 and 19, resulting in an average enrollment age of 15 years. The average for the subjects was slightly higher.

The average length of stay was 1 year, 5 months. The recommended completion time for the program is 1 year, 6 months. Twenty-five percent ( $n=14$ ) of the subjects stayed longer than the expected 18 months, 18% ( $n=10$ ) stayed 18 months, and 42% exited somewhere between 18 months and one year. Fifteen percent of the subjects ( $n=8$ ) remained in the program approximately one year or less (see Table 2). Six students exited the program early due to incompatibility with the program, while the other two left due to the termination of their funding. Of those terminating early, 63% ( $n=5$ ) were involved in some type of delinquent activity and were sent to an alternative program, detention or the department of corrections. This figure

is high when compared to the entire group of subjects. Of the 55 surveys received, only 15% (n=8) reported that they had entered one of the previously mentioned facilities.

The average current age for the subjects is 19 years, 5 months, with 69% of the sample at 18 years of age or older, 20% between 17 and 18 years of age, and 11% between 15 and 17 years of age. One concern about increasing the population size was that it would result in a younger group of subjects who would not have had the opportunity to begin pursuing life outcomes. Instead, it seems that the older enrollment ages coupled with the average length of stay, have resulted in an older group of subjects. As a result, the data on the life outcomes of subjects was much more varied than expected.

#### Life Outcomes

Overall, the academic and employment outcomes for the subjects were quite positive. As a result, the majority of the subjects are in school, employed, or both. Fifty-one percent (n=28) of the subjects reported that they have been employed for an average of 2.2 years. The length of employment ran from one week to five years. Eighteen percent have been employed for five years, 11% each for four and three years, 14% for two years, 21% for one year, and 21% for less than one year.

Of the employed subjects, four have earned high school diplomas (14%), 13 have earned GED certificates (46%), one has earned a GED

certificate and a vocational certificate (4%), and eight have not completed their secondary educations and are unsure of when they will (29%). Two are working and attending school, one in high school, and one in college (7%); while two others are working members of the Army National Guard reserves. The occupations listed by the respondents were varied, ranging from landscaper to executive (see Table 3).

After being employed, the most commonly reported current situation was enrollment in school. Sixteen subjects (29%) reported that they are currently attending a public school. Of that subgroup, one respondent listed himself as in school and working, while two reported that they are enrolled in the trade program at their particular school. Four other subjects (7%) indicated that they are enrolled in an ungraded or special school. Three members of this subgroup are taking classes in GED preparation, while the other is anticipating graduation in the coming year from a residential treatment facility. In addition, one subject is currently in graduate school and three others are attending two-year colleges. Three other respondents indicated that they are planning to begin attending a two-year college during the 1994-1995 school year.

Of the remaining subjects, one obtained his GED six months after exiting the program and has been unemployed for the remaining six months. Another received his GED at New Dominion, was employed for

five years, and was laid off in 1993. He is still looking for employment. Three others are currently incarcerated in the department of corrections. One of these subjects received his GED while at New Dominion and exited the program in 1987. He will be finished serving a year and a half sentence in July, 1994. The other two subjects exited New Dominion to ungraded settings, where prior to their incarceration, each was pursuing a GED certificate. Both of these subjects indicated that they would not be completing their educations in the near future.

Personal outcomes for subjects included marital status, number of dependents, and types of living arrangements. As was expected for a relatively young group of subjects, 42 of the respondents (76%) indicated that they are single, followed by eight (15%) who are living with someone other than a parent or family member, four (7%) who are married, and one (2%) who is separated. Nine subjects (16%) claim dependents. Of the 19 listed dependents, six were listed as girlfriends or wives, and the remaining 14 were children. The children ranged from three who were unborn at the time of the survey, to infants, toddlers, and young children.

Living arrangements were divided up rather equally between three situations. Sixteen subjects (29%) reported they were renting an apartment or house, fifteen (27%) were living with both parents or legal guardians, and fifteen (27%) were living with one parent or

legal guardian. Of the remaining respondents, one (2%) owns his own home, two (4%) live in group homes, and 6 (11%) reported other living arrangements that included foster parents, the department of corrections, and specialized programs.

On the final section of the questionnaire, each respondent provided specific information regarding his academic outcomes. Forty-four percent (n=24) of the subjects have earned a diploma or a GED. Twenty percent (n=11) of those with GED's earned them prior to exiting the program at NDS. In addition, forty-two percent (n=23) are currently pursuing a diploma or GED. Four percent (n=2) graduated from New Dominion High School, while another 15% (n=8) have not completed their educations and currently have no plans for doing so in the future. Sixty-five percent (n=36) of the respondents who exited the program returned to a graded school setting, while 11% (n=6) returned to an ungraded setting.

Of those who returned to graded settings, 27 (75% of students in graded settings, 49% of total population) returned to the regular classroom. Another eight (22% of students in graded settings, 15% of total population) attended or are attending all day special education classes, while resource classes were attended by one respondent (3% of students in graded settings, 2% of total population). Of students returning to an ungraded academic setting, 100% (n=6) returned to GED classes.

The final question on the survey was designed to determine how much time elapsed between the respondents' departure from NDS and their educational outcomes. Forty-two percent (n=23) of the respondents indicated that they had earned or will earn a diploma. The average length of time between their departure from NDS and that outcome is 2.97 years. Twenty-two percent (n=5) of those respondents have already earned their diplomas, while the remaining 78% (n=18) intend to earn a diploma. Those who earned their diplomas took an average of 2.38 years to do so, while those who intend to earn diplomas plan to do so in 3.16 years. Subjects who earned or plan to earn GED's will do so approximately 3.00 years after leaving the school. Of those, 73% (n=8) have already acquired their certificates and 27% (n=3) intend to earn a GED certificate.

## Discussion

As was noted earlier, due to a shortage of usable surveys, the population for this study was broadened to include recently exited students. Consequently, 40% of the sample exited the program within the past two years. This was a concern, as it might have resulted in a sample too young to have experienced many life outcomes. The results of the study have proven this concern to be unfounded. The demographic data indicates that although the subjects stayed in the program slightly less than the recommended completion time of 16 months, they were above the average admissions age when they entered the program. As a result, 69% of the sample was 18 years of age or older and had had the opportunity to experience various life outcomes.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher assumed that at the time of enrollment at NDS, some of the subjects were dropouts as defined by Solomon (1989). That is, they were in school, but academically disengaged. Others actually may not have been attending school, but may have fallen between the cracks given the various definitions of "dropout" that could be utilized by their particular school system or agency (Rumberger, 1986; Frase, 1989). This researcher also assumed that since the clientele at New Dominion includes students of all academic capabilities (i.e., gifted, LD, ED), the subjects also exhibit the same academic diversity. Based



on the current data on the life outcomes of dropouts, and special education graduates and dropouts, it appears that participation in the program at New Dominion may have resulted in a positive effect on the life outcomes for these subjects.

Academically, subjects who attended New Dominion were more likely to complete their secondary educations than were their counterparts in public school. Within three years of exiting the program, forty-four percent of the subjects surveyed earned a high school diploma or GED and forty-two percent are currently pursuing one of the two options. This is significantly above the results found by Kolstad and Owings (1986). In their study of high school sophomores who dropped out of school in 1980, after four years, only 38% had earned a diploma or GED.

Similarly, data from the National Longitudinal Transitional Study (NTLS) indicated that of special education graduates, only 23% returned to some type of educational setting. The NTLS also reported that 4% of special education graduates attend a 2-year college, and 1% attend a 4-year college (Wagner, 1989, 1991a, 1991b; Butler-Nalin & Wagner, 1991; Wagner et al., 1991). Five percent of the subjects in this study are attending a 2-year college and another 4% were planning to enroll in the fall. An additional 2% are enrolled in graduate school at a 4-year college. As was expected, at 15%, the dropout rate for this group was higher than the current

national dropout rate of 12%. This rate was, however, lower than the current national dropout rate of 27% for special education students (U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

According to the data, the employment rate for the subjects is significantly lower than the employment rate for nondisabled graduates. Edgar and Levine (1987) found that only 45% of handicapped graduates were employed as compared to 75% of the nonhandicapped graduates. The NTLS data indicated that disabled graduates were employed at a rate of 45%, while their nondisabled counterparts were employed at a rate of 59% (Wagner, 1989; D'Amico, 1991). Subjects in this study reported an employment rate of 51%; however, this figure includes subjects who are currently in school. If this figure is adjusted to compensate for the 23 subjects who are pursuing an education, the resulting employment rate is an impressive 88%.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the subjects (54%) are living with one or both parents or legal guardians. Thirty-five percent reported that they are living elsewhere. This is similar to the data reported by Edgar and Levine (1987) whose study indicated that disabled students were living independently at a rate of 40%, while their nondisabled peers were living independently 55% of the time. The NTLS also found that by four years postgraduation, 36% of disabled youth were living independently (Wagner, 1991a, 1991b; Wagner et

al., 1991). Seventeen percent of these independent youth were married or living with someone of the opposite sex, as compared to 16% of the subjects in this study (Newman, 1991).

The most exciting outcome of this study was the amount of investment that the subjects still seem to have in the program at New Dominion. The bonds formed with the program and the staff are in many cases still strong. This was evidenced by the notes, letters, and pictures that accompanied many of the surveys. One subject commented, "New Dominion was the best thing that ever happened to me. Thank you NDS!" Many expressed a desire to visit the program and several contacted me personally. Sadly, one subject wrote a letter explaining his current incarceration, but he ended on a positive note saying that he'd gotten himself straight and that he'd be released soon. Although some of the subjects were struggling at the moment, they all appeared to be happy, and most importantly, hopeful.

#### Limitations and Improvements

The main problem with this study, as in all descriptive research, was the instrument. The questionnaire used to survey the subjects could have been improved in several ways. For example, information regarding age of enrollment, length of stay, and current age can be obtained directly from the student files at NDS; therefore, those questions should be omitted. The current status section of the survey

should be altered to allow subjects to list all experiences that have occurred since they exited New Dominion. This particular oversight made it difficult to draw any conclusions on the rate at which subjects became involved with the law. For instance, three subjects listed their current status as incarcerated. Although at first glance, this appears to be a low figure, there is no way to account for subjects who may have been incarcerated and then released. Also, a question concerning current salary would provide information regarding the quality of jobs being obtained by the subjects. Finally, questions regarding participation in recreational, church, and civic organizations would result in a broader understanding of the social outcomes experienced by the respondents. This researcher feels that these suggested improvements would provide additional data which would allow for a more thorough comparison of this study to existing studies.

The questions raised by this study indicate a need for further research. For example, will those subjects who plan to earn their diplomas/GED's do so? Will the subjects who currently have no plans for completing their educations do so in the future? In addition, are these subjects active in their community or church? Do they participate in elections? How do these subjects compare to students who have participated in the more traditional dropout prevention

programs? How will our changing society affect the life outcomes of dropouts? These are only a few of the questions that educators should be striving to answer, and one place to start is New Dominion.

Suggestions for future research could include a similar study to be conducted with a revised instrument. The population could also be increased to include all students who have participated in the program. Another alternative would be to select randomly students who are exiting the program and ask if they would be willing to complete a similar questionnaire once a year for the following five years. Finally, a study such as this, in which subjects are selected randomly from the population of exited students, could be repeated every five to ten years.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey Sample

NEW DOMINION ALUMNI SURVEY

I. General Information

- 1) Age when you enrolled at New Dominion? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Length of stay at New Dominion? \_\_\_\_\_ year(s), \_\_\_\_\_ month(s)
- 3) Your current age is: \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Your current status is:  
\_\_\_\_ public school, \_\_\_\_ grade, (please specify school name below)  
\_\_\_\_ ungraded/special school, \_\_\_\_ years, (please specify school name below)  
\_\_\_\_ trade school, \_\_\_\_ years, (please specify school name below)  
\_\_\_\_ armed services, \_\_\_\_ years, (please specify branch) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ 2-year college, \_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ 4-year college, \_\_\_\_ years  
\_\_\_\_ graduate school, \_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ juvenile detention, \_\_\_\_ years  
\_\_\_\_ employed, \_\_\_\_ years as \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ unemployed, \_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ department of corrections, \_\_\_\_ years
- 5) Your current marital status is: \_\_\_\_\_ single \_\_\_\_\_ married \_\_\_\_\_ separated  
\_\_\_\_ divorced \_\_\_\_\_ living with someone
- 6) Number and ages of dependents: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 7) Your current living arrangements are:  
\_\_\_\_ living with one parent/legal guardian \_\_\_\_\_ own your home  
\_\_\_\_ living with both parents/legal guardians \_\_\_\_\_ living in a group home  
\_\_\_\_ renting an apartment/house  
\_\_\_\_ other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

II. Educational Information

- 1) If you returned to a graded setting, which type of classes are you attending or did you attend? (Check one and continue from question number three.)  
\_\_\_\_ regular classes \_\_\_\_\_ all day special education classes \_\_\_\_\_ resource classes  
\_\_\_\_ other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) If you returned to an ungraded setting, which type of classes are you attending or did you attend? (check one)  
\_\_\_\_ adult basic education classes (ABE) \_\_\_\_\_ general equivalency diploma (GED)  
\_\_\_\_ other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Will you or did you complete your education after leaving New Dominion? \_\_\_\_\_ no,  
\_\_\_\_ yes (If yes, which of the following will you or did you receive?)  
\_\_\_\_ diploma \_\_\_\_\_ certificate of completion  
\_\_\_\_ GED \_\_\_\_\_ vocational certificate  
\_\_\_\_ other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) How much time will pass or has passed between your termination from NDS and one of the outcomes listed in question number three? \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B

Cover Letter Sample

Rt. 3, Box 134  
Cumberland, VA 23040  
December 15, 1993

Dear New Dominion Alumnus:

I am a teacher at New Dominion School as well as a graduate student at Longwood College. As a requirement for graduation, I am conducting a research study for my Master's thesis. Through this study, I hope to gather information which will help the teachers and staff at NDS to better serve our students. For this reason, I am asking for your help.

I have enclosed a survey requesting information about your stay at NDS, as well as current information about you. Any information you provide will be used solely for this study and will be held in the strictest confidence. There will be no evidence to link you to the information you provide or to the study. Your participation is completely voluntary; however, I would appreciate your help. Please fill out the survey and return it in the enclosed envelope by \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Lillian F. Johansen

encl



Appendix C

Follow-Up Postcard Sample

July 18, 1994

Dear New Dominion Alumnus

Recently I sent you a survey and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The information I have asked you to provide is crucial to my research project. I would appreciate it if you would take a brief moment to complete the survey and return it immediately. If you receive this postcard but have not received a survey, please contact me at (804)983-1198 (collect calls accepted). If you have already completed and returned your survey, Thank You.

Thank you again,

Lillian F. Johansen

Tables

Table 1

**STATISTICAL DATA ON AGE AT ENROLLMENT, LENGTH OF STAY, AND CURRENT AGE**

	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
<b>Average Age at Enrollment</b>	15 years, 6 months	15 years, 3 months	15 years, 4 months 15 years, 3 months 15 years, 1 month 13 years, 6 months	4 years, 9 months
<b>Average Length of Stay</b>	1 year, 5 months	1 year, 5 months	1 year, 5 months	2 years, 1 month
<b>Average Current Age</b>	19 years, 5 months	19 years, 3 months	17 years, 9 months	11 years, 0 months

Table 2

**LENGTH OF STAY AT NEW DOMINION**

<b>Length of Stay</b>	<b>Number of Subjects</b>	<b>Percent of Subjects</b>
2 years, 4 months	1	2%
2 years, 3 months	1	2%
2 years, 0 months	1	2%
1 year, 11 months	2	4%
1 year, 10 months	2	4%
1 year, 9 months	2	4%
1 year, 8 months	3	5%
1 year, 7 months	3	5%
1 year, 6 months	9	16%
1 year, 5 months	10	18%
1 year, 4 months	2	4%
1 year, 3 months	5	9%
1 year, 2 months	2	4%
1 year, 1 month	4	7%
1 year, 0 months	2	4%
11 months	1	2%
9 months	1	2%
8 months	1	2%
5 months	1	4%
3 months	1	2%

Table 3

**OCCUPATIONAL OUTCOMES**

<b>Occupational Outcomes</b>	<b>Number of Subjects</b>	<b>Percent of Subjects</b>
chef/cook	4	11%
construction worker	4	11%
landscaper	4	11%
fast food cook	2	4%
carpenter	1	4%
car lot attendant	1	4%
dish washer	1	4%
executive	1	4%
factory worker	1	4%
fireman	1	4%
gas station attendant	1	4%
janitor	1	4%
linelead/software plant	1	4%
mobile home installer	1	4%
owns small business	1	4%
painter	1	4%
photo lab technician	1	4%
sales clerk	1	4%