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David George Baumgartner

University of Northern Iowa

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Student services possibilities in response to the black student attrition rate

Abstract
Retention has, in the last few years, become a major topic of research and scrutiny. Retention merits close examination, because forecasters project that a 23% decline will occur nationally among traditional students by 1997 (Lonabocker, 1982). Due to this fact, it becomes apparent to administrators, faculty and student personnel professionals that the future of colleges and universities depends, to a large degree, on their ability to minimize the attrition rate.
STUDENT SERVICES POSSIBILITIES IN RESPONSE
TO THE BLACK STUDENT ATTRITION RATE

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
David George Baumgartner
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Entitled: STUDENT SERVICES POSSIBILITIES IN RESPONSE TO THE BLACK STUDENT ATTRITION RATE

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Thomas W. Hansmeier

Date Approved: June 9, 1987
Adviser/Director of Research Paper

J. F. Kimball

Date Approved: June 10, 1987
Second Reader of Research Paper

Norman McCumsey

Date Received: June 11, 1987
Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
Retention has, in the last few years, become a major topic of research and scrutiny. Retention merits close examination, because forecasters project that a 23% decline will occur nationally among traditional students by 1997 (Lonabocker, 1982). Due to this fact, it becomes apparent to administrators, faculty and student personnel professionals that the future of colleges and universities depends, to a large degree, on their ability to minimize the attrition rate.

If university professionals are not moved by the necessity to help students remain in school because of a sense of duty or social responsibility, they may want to consider the institutional costs of attrition. University finances are, of course, impacted by enrollment and the tuition dollar. Baldridge (1982) suggested that more than two-thirds of a student's tuition or subsidy will be lost when a student leaves school. When tuition drops, the income of the residence facilities and their auxiliary revenue also drops. One dropout can cost the university the entire residence hall fees for one year. If the quality of residence halls drops and campus services decline, this deterioration discourages student use and thus produces even less revenue. "A vicious cycle can develop;
dropouts, lower revenues, poorer service, more dropouts" (Baldridge, 1982, p. 37).

A good portion of concern is focused on the attrition rate associated with the Black university student. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is to focus on the Black attrition rate, the situation as it exists today and what might be done tomorrow.

**Attrition Factors**

Today, many Black students are enrolling in colleges and universities that have in the past served primarily the needs of White students. In 1982, the United States Bureau of the Census showed more than 1,750,000 Black men and women enrolled in postsecondary institutions, most of whom attended historically White colleges and universities (Spaights, 1985). In light of these numbers, it should be clear that colleges and universities need to facilitate the Black students' adjustment to college life. University administrators and student personnel professionals should be cognizant of the differences, if any, between the Black students and their White cohorts (Pittenger, 1984).

Rugg (1982) found that Black students tend to exhibit greater voluntary persistence than White students. It is important to note that the career
aspirations of Black students are consistent with White students (Leonard, 1984). Why then do White students consistently outperform Blacks in terms of persistence in college (Gosman, 1983)? Avakian (1982) reported a consistently higher retention rate for White students than for Black students.

Generally, Black students tend to drop out of the college or university for the same basic reasons as White students. Astin (1975) found that students drop out of college because of: a) boredom, b) financial difficulties, and c) other reasons. There is reason to believe the "other reasons" may be environmental. Astin (1975), for example, found that Blacks are about one and one-half times more likely to experience financial difficulties. Slaney (1983) reported that school-related issues such as low grades, program entry difficulties, boredom or dissatisfaction with college were more pronounced for Black students. Certainly, the more exclusive problems of Black students tend to be environmental responses which include: a) stress factors, b) no Black role models, and c) the students' perception of racism. Edmunds (1982) found that stressors of Black students fall into six categories:
a) financial, b) academic, c) environmental, d) personal, e) interpersonal, and f) career. The stress factors by category and response rates are listed in Table 1 (Edmunds, p. 53).

Table 1
Black Student Stress Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FINANCIAL</td>
<td>Financial Difficulties</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACADEMIC</td>
<td>Writing Term Paper</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text Anxiety</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answering Essay Questions</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor Study Skills and Habits</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVIRONMENTAL</td>
<td>Few Black Classmates</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lacking Leadership Among Black Students</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lacking Unity Among Black Students</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insensitive Attitudes of Administrators</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Academic Expectations of Faculty for Black Student Performance</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONAL</td>
<td>Decision Making and Problem Solving</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERPERSONAL</td>
<td>Black Male/Female Relationships</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAREER</td>
<td>Preparation for Job Market</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The environment is a "real" stress factor for the Black student. Not only are 50-60% of the Black students surveyed concerned with how they are viewed by
faculty, but they are also concerned with outside perceptions of the Black group as a whole.

An important concern in recent years is the small number of Black instructors at the university level. At the University of Northern Iowa, for example, only 6 of 543 faculty members (1.1%) in 1986 were Black (Personnel Services, UNI 1986). The lack of role models for Black students is a definite consequence of too few Black faculty members (Harvey, 1986). Without role models, it is difficult for students, especially freshmen, to maintain the enthusiasm and the ability to dream and reach for success. Students, regardless of race or culture, need role models to inspire creativity and impact the students' mind, body and emotions. The decreased opportunity for Black and White faculty members to interact could harm students in general. Lack of interaction could cause White faculty members to be desensitized to Black needs. A fine blend of Black and White ensures a healthy exchange of ideas and offers solutions for the problems of the future.

The Black students' perception of racism may cause stress and anxiety which could lead to dropping out of school. In a study by Rutledge (1983), Black and White students were asked to respond to questions of
favoritism. When asked, Does the faculty show favoritism to any group?, 56% of the Blacks answered, yes, and 86.7% of Whites said, no. When asked to identify which group was most favored, 93.5% of the Black students indicated that the White group was most favored; 50% of the Whites said the Black group was the most favored, and the other 50% said the White group was the most favored. A vast majority of the Black students (84%) and half of the White students (50%) perceived Blacks as being the group least favored by the faculty.

It is noteworthy that the environment seems to be the most neglected area when examining the needs of Black students. Although Blacks and Whites interact in the same university environment, the impact of, and perceptions within, the environment are indeed different. The minority status in a majority environment affects the lives of all Black students (Hall, 1983). It becomes apparent that student personnel professionals and administrators, if they want to raise the retention rate of Blacks, must find ways to sensitize themselves and others to the impact of the environment on Blacks.
**Student Personnel Professionals as Change Agents**

One of the greatest compliments a student personnel professional can be given is that he or she has effected positive change. Student personnel professionals not only have their hands on the pulse of the university but also on the students' pulse. Therefore, student personnel professionals are in an excellent position to be change agents.

In the area of Black student attrition rates, student personnel professionals might effect positive change by pursuing three possible endeavors: a) creative orientation, b) advising by faculty-student interaction, and c) preventative posturing.

**Orientation**

The benefits of orientation programs are well documented in the literature. In order to retain Black students, it is necessary to get them off to a good start. The programs described below are an assortment of various orientation alternatives which could benefit the Black student.

Noel (1978) suggested the use of "survival tools." These tools would partially consist of a question and answer format dealing with student problems and the
services the student could take advantage of to ameliorate these problems.

Astin (1975) suggested that freshmen be given a profile of the typical dropout. The student would also be given a worksheet to calculate his or her own chances of dropping out and could then compare his/her profile to the dropout's profile. The university could use the data collected to supply information for further research and future counseling. Gardiner (1983) stated that orientation programs should be used to inform students of the factors that are associated with dropping out. Furthermore, orientation should be made an ongoing program, lasting through the freshman year, in order to provide the student with consistent information.

Green (1986) reported that the theatre is a vehicle whereby freshmen can learn about college life. In these dramas, real problems and experiences of typical college students are acted out on stage for the benefit of incoming freshmen and their parents. "The show is student development in action, without sugar coating" (Green, 1986, p. 33).
Advising with Faculty Interaction

As helpers, student personnel professionals are perceptive of the need for awareness on the part of the student in regard to advising. All too often, students with problems bypass available services because of ignorance or the "I can handle it myself" syndrome. The following programs could be geared for Black students in the college and university setting.

Glennen (1985) described a new "intrusive advising" program at Western New Mexico University. The attrition rate for freshmen was 65%. Instead of a once-a-year student/advisor meeting, students and advisors are required to meet several times per year. Four categories determine the schedule: a) high risk students, b) students with midterm deficiencies, c) preregistration for next semester, and d) all other students. The schedule is set up to coincide with possible problem times in the academic semester instead of waiting for a problem to occur. Students found the atmosphere to be secure, supportive and home-away-from-home. Between 1981-1982, the attrition rate dropped from 66% to 48%. During the 1982-1983 school year, the attrition rate dropped from 48% to 25%.
Studies have shown that the interaction between faculty and students is one of the most important determinants of retention. Ramist (1981) reported that interaction leads to academic and social integration in college, higher grades, greater self-perceived intellectual growth and higher interpersonal self-esteem. Students who interact with the faculty are sought out more by their peers and read more books for pleasure. It is noteworthy that faculty members interact with students at the rate of only one per day, although each feels the necessity and importance of such meetings. Ramist (1981) suggested four steps to facilitate faculty-student interactions: a) faculty sessions to promote faculty-student interaction, b) involve faculty in early freshman activities, c) encourage more detailed feedback than a letter grade to each student about his or her performance, and d) establish incentive and reward structures for faculty-student interaction, particularly in faculty promotion and salary decisions.

All too often, misunderstanding and stereotyping of the Black student by faculty members result in failure of the student (Spaights, 1985). Some faculty may feel Blacks are behind Whites academically and
treat them accordingly. The self-fulfilling prophecy follows, which results in low self esteem and possible withdrawal from the university. The faculty should make every effort to interact with and encourage the Black student.

Boyd (1982) presented an interesting plan that involves small discussion groups for minority students. The groups are led by the counseling staff who intend to generate questions and answers about problem areas and possible problem students. The various tasks include:

1. The designation of defendable target group students.

2. Brainstorming over possible factors rendering a given group of students vulnerable to attrition.

3. Designing of creative intervention likely to retard the attrition rates.

4. The rigorous testing of effects.

**Maintaining a Preventative Posture**

All too often, students, faculty, administration and student personnel professionals seek solutions to problems while operating from a reactionary position. Tomorrow's professionals will need the vision to prevent a problem before it becomes a reality. The
early warnings and predictors of Black attrition will, in the end, allow many students to realize their dreams. Lenning (1980) reported that the retention program for colleges and universities should be directed at specific groups of students (for example, Black students), identify potential dropouts and target efforts toward them.

Lenning (1980) listed six characteristics of disadvantaged students.

1. Disadvantaged students tend to be poorly motivated.

2. Disadvantaged students are unrealistic in the amount of time needed to finish school.

3. Disadvantaged students have emotional problems that undermine self confidence.

4. Disadvantaged students are poor readers.

5. Disadvantaged students have problems thinking in abstract terms.

6. Disadvantaged students and their parents are suspicious of intellectuals.

These characteristics oftentimes lead to failure on the part of the Black student and should be part of prediction programs.
Baldridge (1982) reported a project in which early warning task forces worked with admissions offices to compile a list of incoming freshmen who were likely to drop out. When the students were identified, the Student Services machinery was put into motion:

1. High intensity advising systems were set up.
2. Students were assigned to special advisors.
3. Special attention was given to remedial programs and counseling programs for minorities.

These actions reduce future problems. People are not wondering what to do; professionals are already doing it.

Pascarella (1982) proposed the Synthetic Model. This model identifies four variables that affect the intent to leave school.

1. BACKGROUND VARIABLES -- mother/father's education level, hometown size and location.
2. ORGANIZATIONAL VARIABLES -- regulation of life at school, close friends, grades, financial aid, and contact with faculty.
3. ENVIRONMENTAL VARIABLES -- family approval, likelihood of job and marriage, finances.
4. OUTCOME AND ATTITUINAL VARIABLES -- practical value, boredom, confidence, goals, and loyalty.

This model is excellent for identifying potential dropouts before they leave school. Data are collected by questionnaire. The questionnaires are analyzed and the dropout-prone students are given the help they need.

**Summary and Conclusions**

College and university professionals are indeed aware of the current problems in regard to attrition and retention. When Black students drop out, it's not only an opportunity loss in terms of the students' minds, but also in terms of revenue for higher education. The fact that nearly two million Blacks attend institutions of higher learning should suggest to university professionals that Blacks, as a group, have a large amount of political and financial power. From a singular point of view, one only needs to remember what Black professionals have accomplished as individuals in recent years.

Weissberg (1982) reported that Blacks have stronger needs than Whites in terms of academic and career development. Studies show that universities do not seem to be doing as good a job in meeting the needs
of Blacks as they do for White students. This is due either to lack of services for Blacks or Blacks' failure to realize the services exist. It must be remembered that, although Blacks and Whites operate in the same environment, the effects of the environment, on each group, are different.

Some literature suggests that colleges and universities are racist in terms of administration, faculty, and services. Hollar (1982) stated that "racism will continue to be a major force in the life of every minority student" (p. 23). Racism on the college campus may be manifested in a lack of sensitivity to Black students' needs.

A student personnel professional must strive for change by maintaining a preventative posture and by taking some risks. In order to succeed tomorrow in the area of Black attrition, plans must be implemented today.

Student personnel professionals should echo the needs of Black students by calling on department heads, faculty and administrators to reaffirm their commitment to a supportive environment for all students. This basic university commitment must be demonstrated by actively recruiting and providing an appropriate
proportion of Black faculty. This step alone will provide role models for Black students, expose White students to Black perspectives, and provide needed interaction between White and Black students.
References


Personnel Services (1986). The University of Northern Iowa.


