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Laura C. Peck
Kansas State University

Pamela D. Dietz
Kansas State University

Sarah J. Fishback

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At Risk Students at Urban and Rural Community Colleges

Dr. Laura C. Peck, Kansas State University, USA
Dr. Pamela D. Dietz, Kansas State University, USA
Dr. Sarah J. Fishback, Kansas State University, USA

Abstract: Research conducted at one urban and one rural community college illustrated factors that lead to persistence in completing educational goals, what specific factors put the students at risk, and how formal and informal actions taken at community colleges can improve successful completion for first generation college students living in poverty.

Introduction

Community colleges serve as the entry point to higher education for many at risk first generation college students. Community colleges are locally available, less costly than a four year institution, are accessible to students requiring remedial developmental courses, have fewer requirements for admission, are more flexible in the times the classes are available for learners with family or work obligations, which meet the needs of the at risk, first generation college students. Two dissertation studies reported in this paper were undertaken, one at an diverse urban community college comprised of over 23,000 learners located on five campuses in a metropolitan area of over 2.5 million, and one at a small, rural community college with 1,524 learners on one campus located in a town of 6,487 people

Urban Community College Research

The first research project, a qualitative phenomenological study based on semi-structured ninety minute interviews using a constant comparison methodology, took place at a culturally and racially diverse urban Midwest community college of over 23,000 students and studied five purposefully selected African American women, with diverse age, employment, and marital status. The research focused on barriers, challenges, responsibilities and support systems participants utilized and how this impacted their learning experience. Limited research has been conducted on Midwest, low income, African American women and barriers and support systems they use while pursuing community college education in an urban setting.

Findings and Discussion

Findings that emerged from the research included situational barriers, and dispositional barriers. Institutional barriers were both more significant and factors that the community college could change. They included: a) a lack of academic and career counseling, b) attitudes of staff and faculty, c) racism and d) college administrative and student services hours conflicted with working learners schedules.

The lack of academic and career counseling had a powerful impact as three of the five subjects from the urban community college changed their course of study. Their reasons included lack of knowledge about their career field, and when faced with the courses, internships, or actually working in a field, they found it didn't meet their expectations. This forced them to seek an alternative career field, which created a financial burden and delayed completion. There is a strong need for timeliness in orientation and pre-enrollment services to start learners out in the appropriate field of study. Changing a

course of study, especially for marginalized learners, living in poverty, and with limited job skills, frequently results in attrition, so this was an area that merited further research (Gordon, Habley, Crites, & Associates, 2008; Nutt, 2003; Orndorff & Herr, 1996). Two of the subjects considered quitting, but all subjects stated that they were strongly motivated to serve as a role model for their children and the African American community, so they remained in school (Peck, 2010). This theme was universally held with this group of learners.

Career Centers are responsible for assessing learners with surveys, or inventories which might give strong indicators for possible career fields matching a learner's interests and abilities. Large numbers of advisees, and limited resources may result in guidelines for advising and student assessments that were not always well-designed or were under-utilized. Another resource for the community college to utilize for career advice is the local community. The urban community college is situated in a metropolitan area of more than two million people. There are many businesses, schools, and other organizations that could provide mentors to learners who are contemplating entering the workforce in their career field. Shadowing, which can be as simple as interviewing someone in the career field in which the learner is interested, or as complex as following a worker in the designated field around and observing exactly what s/he does during the course of a work day (McDonald, 2005). Learners might have been unaware of the services that career centers can provide. Peer mentors are valuable assets who can assist a fellow learner through unfamiliar community college systems, such as registration, financial aid, and finding advice from a career counselor or academic advisor. Most of the learners interviewed were acting as peer mentors to students who were younger, less experienced, or new to their community college (Peck, 2010).

Other institutional barriers were the institutions attitudes toward adult learner's age, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, national origin, veteran status, disability status, and generational status, i.e. first generation college student (Cross, 1991; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm, Polson & Fishback, 2002). Racism was reported by three of five subjects; all three described instructors who were racist, two instructors who believed due to their race, they would not succeed in their classes, and one who belittled African American learners in class, and graded them differently. Most post-secondary institutions don't have advisors of the same race or ethnicity as the students they advised. Cross-cultural advising could be challenging. For example, many African American learners have made decisions concerning their schedules, and academic majors in conjunction with their families and support groups, so the wishes of the support group must be considered, as well as the wishes of the student. First-generation college students may encounter a cultural conflict between home and college community (Thayer, 2000). The need for an academic advisor to be cognizant of multicultural academic advising techniques was reinforced by the research conducted at the urban community college, as many of the learners interviewed indicated that they talked to their support groups prior to enrolling. That support group included a faculty member that one learner had become close to, siblings, pastors, friends, and children. If the academic advisor was to successfully advise multicultural learners, then the advisor should holistically advise the learner, understand the student's family background, refer the learner to a mentoring program or a mentor, and develop multicultural competencies (Gordon, Habley, Crites, & Associates, 2008). Peck, (2010), found that urban community college learners who work frequently do not have the ability to utilize the services of a community college, as most services that are offered are available when the learners are at work. Even services that extend into the evening, as some tutoring and

language labs offered services until 7:30 p.m. frequently conflicted, as when the student was on campus at those hours, she was in class.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for practice in this study: (a) without proper initial advising and career counseling, many students pursued untenable career paths, ran out of resources, and could have dropped out. Solutions such as mandatory standardized orientation programs held evenings and weekends, mentoring, shadowing, job fairs and consistent advising need to be developed. (b) First generation college students do not have family cultural capital understanding the college system, so students flounder. Peer volunteers connected to someone current on college policies could help. Mentors provide more insight on services the learners might utilize, such as financial aid, tutoring, testing services, advisors, with appropriate names and contact information (c) Since family was reported as a powerful motivating factor, connecting the family to the community college could enhance that motivation. Giving out tickets to sporting events, family days, open houses, informal parties and similar events could familiarize family with the college community and environment. (d) Racism exists; instructors need formal training to be aware of their impact on learners (Delgado & Stefancic). (e) Institutional barriers of complex enrollment and administration requirements frustrate learners, and cause some to quit. Acknowledging these issues and creating plans to address them could bolster retention, such as special orientations for first generation college students, where knowledgeable volunteers, or trained college personnel cover important aspects of applying for college, what documents learners need to provide, what testing needs to be done, where to find information concerning different programs/majors, and other similar information of which a first generation college student might not be aware. Each community college has a unique set of resources, and can consider establishing a program or set of programs that meet the needs of their learners, and diminish attrition.

Rural Community College Research

The second research project, a qualitative phenomenological study based on semi-structured forty-five minute interviews conducted at a rural community college studied ten purposefully selected volunteers who met the criteria of first generation learners enrolled in remedial developmental classes who received Pell grants. The learners ranged in age from 18 to 66, and included four Caucasian, two African American, two Hispanic, one Native American, and one Asian. Five students reported not working; three worked five hours per week, and two worked ten to forty hours a week. The group was comprised of six traditional aged students, and four non-traditional aged students. All learners had Pell grants, and six received scholarships for a sport or activity. All were enrolled in at least one remedial developmental course.

Findings for First Generation Rural Community College Students

The rural study's primary finding uncovered the fragility of first generation, low income students and their ability to sustain enrollment, if their job, childcare, transportation, health or financial aid failed, the student risked dropping out. The second finding, an institutional issue, that services not consistently being made available during scheduled hours greatly impacted learners. When at risk students had to obtain administrative services, it impacted their work schedules. The third finding, revealed many low income learners living on-campus depended on college food service, which was limited to three meals a

day, and early closure on weekends, that caused students to be food short or hungry. The final issue dealt with nontraditional learners expressed a disconnect with traditional aged learners, especially when seeking tutoring services, as they preferred to be tutored by another nontraditional student (Dietz, 2011).

Implications

The implications for adult education practice (a) at risk students are in danger of dropping out if one area of their life, such as their health, scheduling, financial aid, work, child care or transportation failed. The college can assist the learners in devising safety nets and alternative plans to counter unforeseen events. (b) Lack of consistency in hours of service could be catastrophic to this at risk group of learners. If staff are overextended, then shorten the service hours, but make them consistent, as availability is important. (c) Hungry students don't learn well. Community and volunteer solutions/support could be utilized, i.e. snack packs of healthy food could be provided for students. (d) Peer tutors of traditional aged students did not work well with non-traditional students. Encourage non-traditional students to serve as tutors, or form study groups.

Recommendations for Rural Community College

Many rural community colleges are located in small towns. The size of the towns can be a limiting factor when attempting to provide assistance, services or find solutions for at risk learners. Each community has unique resources, as well as facing unique difficulties. Some of the families in the community were willing to host students from the community college in their homes, which provided support to the student, and also provided meals, companionship, and a feeling of belonging. Not all students lived on campus, and the college could provide a resource, such as a "Rider/Driver Board" which would pair students who had to travel to attend college with another learner coming from a similar location. This could be as inexpensive as a bulletin board, or located on a website. There are undoubtedly other creative solutions to assist at risk learners complete their educations at the community college.

Summary

While some of the issues at the urban and rural community colleges were different; such as hunger issues for on-campus learners at the rural community college, many issues were similar. Both sets of community college learners were concerned about transportation; learners at both community colleges had childcare issues. While services were rated well at the rural community college, there were issues about consistency of hours of availability. The urban community college learners had some issues about the hours of services as well. Some suggestions which may increase the success of community colleges to attract, retain, and experience increased learner success would be to offer standardized student orientation effective in reaching first generation college students, with information in an understandable format of what they need to provide to the college during the application process. Undoubtedly, as each community college is unique, the solutions that will best serve to improve student retention and success will be unique. The research at both rural and urban community colleges added valuable information to adult education practitioners and administrators of community colleges, and warrants discussion and promulgation to a wider audience.

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