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Thomas E. Midgette

Charles Stephens

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The High Risk Minority Student Retention Program (HRMS) was developed to enhance Black student retention at a large, urban Ohio university.

High Risk Minority Student Retention Model: A Collaborative Program for Black Students

Thomas E. Midgette
Charles Stephens

Introduction

Institutions of higher learning must greatly expand their efforts to increase significantly the number and proportion of minority graduates. Furthermore, they must create an academic atmosphere that nourishes minority students and encourage them to succeed . . . and a campus culture that values the diversity minorities bring to institutional life.

One-Third of a Nation, 1988

The need for institutions of higher education to be more effective for minorities and the poor is imperative. Changing demographics suggest that the nation can ill-afford to waste valuable resources by ignoring students of color. Educators and economists have suggested that the nation's future will depend on Black students' success, thus influencing the social, economic, and political stature of this country.

Our society in the 1990s depends on our institutions of higher education being able to attract and graduate a sufficient number of minorities. Left unchecked, the declining participation of minorities in higher education will have severe repercussions for future generations of Americans (Wilson, 1989; 1988). In addition, we risk developing an educational and economic underclass and creating a culture that ignores the talents of a significantly large number of individuals.

Since a great majority of Blacks are attending predominantly White institutions, it becomes even more critical for

Dr. Thomas E. Midgette is on the faculty of the Department of Counseling and Special Education at the University of Akron. Charles Stephens works with minority student retention for the Office of Minority Affairs at the University of Akron.

these institutions to adopt policies that are innovative in recruiting, retaining, and graduating a greater number of minorities. More importantly, educational institutions must play a pivotal role in developing more sensitive programs and strategies to improve the quality of life of minority students, thus increasing the probability that they graduate (O'Brien, 1988; Penn, 1988).

The High Risk Minority Student Retention Model (HRMS)

The High Risk Minority Student Retention model was developed to address concerns about:

- a. The declining pool of minority students who enroll in the urban university described below;
- b. The high attrition rates of Black students in this predominantly White university;
- c. The low graduation rates of Black students in this predominantly White university.

The HRMS Model was implemented in a large (+ 30,000) northeastern Ohio university. This model was developed for "high risk" students, which consisted of 100% African-American individuals. This model allows African-American students who have been academically dismissed to return to school the next semester if they agree to participate in a highly structured program. The HRMS Program is a contractual arrangement between the student and staff which facilitates skill acquisition and social development.

The American Council on Education suggests that only one out of every four Black high school graduates will enroll in college, despite the fact that high school graduation rates for Black students are at an all time high (Hodgkinson, 1985; Astin, 1982). By the year 2020, it is predicted that minorities will represent about 35% of the population of the U.S. Given this demographic shift, the highly negative impact of the disproportionate representation of minorities in college takes on alarming significance.

According to Bureau of Census data, college enrollment for Black students dropped from 33.5% of high school graduates in 1976 to 26.1% in 1985. U.S. Department of Education figures indicate that only 5.9% of recipients of bachelor degrees were Black, representing a 9.26% decline from the high reached in 1980-81.

Traditionally Black Institutions (TBI) have produced the majority of Black college graduates. However, according to current estimates about two-thirds to three-fourths of the Black students in college are now in predominantly White educational settings (Fleming, 1984).

Operation of the HRMS Program

The program staff pairs each participant selected for the program with a minority faculty mentor, a peer counselor, and an academic adviser. All faculty and staff are chosen for their sensitivity and concern for the needs of minority students. Program participants must attend a college survival skills class. In the fall, students begin participating in a counseling group to enhance student quality of life and self esteem. This personal growth group is conducted in collaboration with the University Counseling Center and the Department of Counseling and Special Education. Students who participate in the HRMS Program have their academic dismissal rescinded and are allowed to return to the university the semester following their dismissal.

Selection Process

Listed below are the steps to implement the program:

- (a) Initial retention decisions are made in the usual fashion (i.e., folders of students whose grade point aver-

ages are in the dismissal categories are reviewed by the Dean of the University College, or one of his/her designates, along with students' assigned academic advisors).

(b) At the end of each day's retention meeting, a small group of academic advisers selected by the Director of Minority Retention and the Director of Afro-American Studies, reviews the files of dismissed minority students for the purpose of selecting students who might benefit by continued enrollment in a highly structured program for high risk students. The group examines students' high school background, extracurricular activities in high school and college, and ACT/SAT scores and college grades.

(c) The files for students selected for the program are forwarded to the Dean for his approval. Each file includes a written rationale to support the decision, and the name of the High Risk Minority student's (HRMS) adviser to whom the student is assigned.

(d) Letters are sent to approved students by the Director of Minority Affairs explaining the program and encouraging them to participate.

(e) A student who decides to participate in the program makes an appointment with his/her adviser to establish the written contract.

(f) The following activities are mandatory for all participants:

1. Monthly contact with HRMS adviser;
2. Participation in a special Survival Skills Forum;
3. Monthly contact with HRMS mentor;
4. Weekly meetings with a minority peer counselor;
5. Continuous monitoring of grades by faculty/staff;
6. Attendance at social support groups conducted by the University Counseling Center and Department of Counseling and Special Education;
7. Attend Career Planning Seminar conducted by the Department of Counseling and Special Education and University Counseling Center;
8. Other requirements as established by the HRMS adviser.

The HRMS program is evaluated at the end of each semester. Success is measured by students' questionnaire results, adviser satisfaction, grades received in academic courses and mentor-mentee feedback gathered at various points throughout the semester.

Identified Trends

The program began in Fall 1989 with 23 students of African-American descent. Preliminary findings follow:

- (a) Twenty-one of the 23 (91%) students have improved their cumulative grade point average;
- (b) Nine out of 23 (39%) have received a 2.0 or better grade point average after one semester in the program;
- (c) Six out of 23 (28%) students moved out of the dismissal category;
- (d) Two students improved enough (after only one semester) to come off probation;
- (e) Two students did not enroll Spring Semester because of low grade point average (.5);
- (f) Three students elected not to return Spring Semester;
- (g) One student initiated a total withdrawal from the university;
- (h) The range of the GPAs received after one semester in the High Risk Minority Student Program was 00.0 to 2.9.

Future Implications: A Final Word

Clearly there is a need for more systematic programs that confront the devastating problem of high attrition rates for African-American students enrolled in predominantly White universities. The High Risk Minority Student Retention Program demonstrates that academically dismissed students placed in a highly structured program of skill acquisition and personal attention can be successful in improving their academic performance over a sixteen week period. Future consideration should be given to conducting the HRMS Program for two terms (32 weeks). Two terms of the HRMS Program should produce greater academic improvement and allow stronger mentoring relations to develop and increase the probability that these students will reach their academic and personal goals.

More systematic and longitudinal examination of student data is needed to implement responsive programs for "high risk" African-American students. The faculty and staff who participate in this program should be compensated with appropriate load or release time for making such an investment of time and energy with "high risk" students. The success of many predominantly White institutions may depend not only on how well they recruit these new students, but in the development of innovative programs to retain students of color experiencing academic, personal, and environmental difficulties.

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