OVERVIEW

Spady ([1970]. Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis. Interchanger, 1, 64-85.) and Tinto ([1975]. Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. Review of Educational Research, 45, 89-125), using student attrition models, suggest that the background characteristics of students must be considered when seeking to understand the student’s interaction with the college environment. In this study, Juollie Carroll attempted to discover if participation in a college discovery program would prove useful in improving the retention of educationally underprepared black freshmen. She sought to answer the following questions:

- How do demographic characteristics (i.e., sex, age, home, language) affect academic success and dropout behavior of black freshmen?
- How do preenrollment and individual characteristics (i.e., high school average, academic aptitude, educational goals) affect academic success and dropout behavior of black freshmen?
- How is participation in peer interaction activities by black freshmen related to academic success and dropout behavior?
- How are student-counselor and student-faculty interactions related to the academic success and dropout behavior of black freshmen?
- How are sex, age, and educational goals of those who stay in school and those who drop out related to peer interactions, student-counselor interactions, and student-faculty interactions?

While studies of this type have been done at other institutions, the variables that affect black students’ retention or attrition behavior in predominantly black urban community colleges has not been studied (for example, Gurin & Epps. (1975). Black Consciousness, Identity, and Achievement. (New York: Wiley). Research also indicates that the crucial time for college persistence or dropout behavior occurs during the first year of enrollment and continues into the second year (Astin. [1975]. Preventing Students from Dropping Out. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass). Most blacks, educationally underprepared, also enter college with the pressure of having
to face the enrollment requirement of basic skills courses in reading, writing, and mathematics in order to prepare them for college-level coursework.

DESIGN

The questionnaire used in this study was sent to all fall 1983 first-time students at a predominantly Black urban community college. A total of 137 freshmen (73 college discovery participants and 64 non-college discovery participants) participated in the study. The college discovery students were economically deficient (requiring 100% financial aid) and educationally underprepared. The sample consisted of 30 men, 106 women (1 unknown), and a diverse range of language backgrounds.

Two dependent variables were used: academic success (measured by continuing enrollment and/or progress in basic skill courses) and academic dropout (measured by not continuing as a student and/or unacceptable progress in basic skills courses). Three institutional independent variables were used and measured by responses on the questionnaire: peer interactions, student-counselor interactions, and student/faculty interactions.

FINDINGS

Counselor guidance effectiveness was the single best predicting variable of student retention or attrition. Students who continued in school perceived much greater counselor effectiveness than did those students who dropped out. Students in the college discovery (CD) program were also more positive about counselor guidance than were non-CD students. In terms of educational goal expectations, students who were seeking to achieve their bachelor’s degree rated the counseling services higher than did non-baccalaureate students, whether they actually persisted in school or not.

Student availability was found to be the second most reliable predictor of retention or attrition. The CD group (but not the non-CD group)persisters felt that upper-class students were more available than did dropout and transfer students. Also, those students with the highest degree expectations felt most positive about their interactions with upper-class students. This last finding may be explained by assuming that students who continue in the institution and are seeking bachelor’s degrees are
probably the most positive about their college experience and also the most confident. Such characteristics probably led to the best interaction with the upper-class students.

CONCLUSIONS

The above results are revealing. First, the role of the counselor and the scope of counseling services are important in the retention of black, underprepared students. The fact that CD students rated counseling higher than did non-CD students may be attributed to individual differences in the quality of counseling and the comprehensive form of the CD group counseling program. Second, the low rating on all the scales by non-baccalaureate dropouts emphasizes the general disenchantment and disenfranchisement of this group. This group had the lowest educational goals at the time of admission to college; this indecisiveness makes assistance by the counselor less effective and relationships with other students more strained. The independent variable, highest expected degree, was critical in determining the level of satisfaction with the college experience in an urban community college. Those indicating a desire to achieve a bachelor’s degree were most likely to pursue an associate’s degree, and if they dropped out, then they usually had lower expectations of achievement, and they most likely pursued certification programs. This variable is also a significant predictor of student persistence. It is expected that the high school grade point average is the best predictor of persistence, but it does not consistently predict academic success in a predominantly black urban community college setting like this one. Additionally, geographic distance between college and home, English as a first language, and specification of the college attended being the student’s first choice before admission also significantly relates to freshman attrition.

IMPLICATIONS

• Comprehensive and ongoing freshman’s group counseling programs that emphasize attitude, motivation, career, and affective study habits will help black freshman integrate into the college environment.
• Models of success need to be provided for young black college students, including upper-class students, professors, and other successful people in all areas of specialty. Programs need to be
devised which maximize student contact with such people, especially during the freshman year.

• Monitoring academic and personal concerns and problems of black students needs to begin early in their college career and continued at least through their sophomore year.

• Institutional and informal programs that promote positive peer group relations are necessary. Student development departments, educators, and campus organizations can fulfill these needs.

• In a community college setting, students pursuing less than a bachelor’s degree need the greatest degree of support and attention.

• Continuing research should enable counselors to better understand the nature and value of their services and identify other preventative intervention strategies.

• At-risk students should receive early identification; freshmen on academic probation should be well known to departments, counselors, and the financial aid office.

• Early alert systems that identify academic problems should be developed.

• Exit interviews should be mandatory for students who transfer or withdraw from the college.

(Some of these implications were drawn from an implications section within this research article.)

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