Climbing Out from Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Responding to the Challenges of the At-Risk Student.

The 1993 book, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The At-Risk Student in the Open-Door College," provided a status report on community college responses to at-risk students, or students who possess academic, social, and economic problems that challenge their success in college. In addition to providing a brief history of at-risk programs and literature and research reviews, the book highlighted 12 exemplary community college programs. Although the programs served different at-risk populations, they shared numerous policy and procedural characteristics. These characteristics, and their implications, can be condensed into the following nine recommendations: (1) pre-enrollment activities should be proactive, offering skills testing to potential students in elementary or high school and occupational testing to adults; (2) orientation should be required of entering students; (3) late registration should be abolished; (4) basic skills assessment and placement should be mandatory, with test data used to place students in appropriate classes; (5) dual enrollment should be eliminated for basic skill and regular academic courses; (6) working students should be strongly encouraged to reduce academic loads to help them better accommodate the demands of work, family, and college; (7) more comprehensive financial aid opportunities and employment for students on campus should be provided; (8) problem-solving and literacy activities should be incorporated into all courses; and (9) student and program outcomes should be evaluated regularly and findings disseminated.
CLIMBING OUT FROM BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF THE AT-RISK STUDENT

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RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF THE AT-RISK STUDENT 

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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The At-Risk Student
in the Open-Door College, a status report on college
responses to at-risk students, described selected
exemplary community college programs designed to
meet the challenges at-risk students create for higher
education. The experiences of researching and working
with at-risk students over the last 25 years created the
expectation of bad news—public school reform that had
not been achieved, students leaving school unprepared
for today’s job market or for college, and a growing adult
student population with few academic skills and many
outside-college responsibilities. Those expectations were
fulfilled, but fortunately, there was also good news—
numerous institutions of higher education are designing
excellent programs to serve the students who meet the
standard, albeit broad, definition of at-risk.

Selected Programs and Survey Questions

The term at-risk describes the reality of today’s
students who possess academic, social, and economic
problems that challenge their success in college—e.g.,
poor academic history, low self-concepts, limited world
views, an absence of role models, family and employ-
ment responsibilities, and financial needs. In addition
to a brief history and review of current literature and
research, 12 community college programs were high-
lighted. All had been formally recognized for their
success by one or more national organizations that look
critically at outcomes of at-risk student programs.
Program directors were asked to respond to questions
about program goals, objectives, and most successful
features; organizational fit; identification and orientation
of students; faculty selection and development;
instructional strategies critical to retention; evaluation
criteria; and future plans.

Major Findings and Recommendations

The successful programs showcased in this study,
and many in the current literature, shared numerous
common policy and procedural characteristics—even
though they served different at-risk populations. The
findings, and their implications, are condensed here into
ten broad-brush recommendations.

Pre-enrollment activities should be proactive. It is
not unusual to find colleges working closely with
elementary and high school students, acquainting them
with the campus and available programs. Moreover,
colleges offer early and regular skills testing to potential
students in an effort to identify those at risk of dropping
out or failing behind academically, and then offer
developmental supplemental instruction in special
classes. In addition, in preparation for college enrollment,
colleges are bringing adults to campus for such activities
as occupational testing, aptitude assessment, and child
care information.

Orientation should be required of entering
students. It is critical that entering students become
familiar with the norms and values of the college. The
majority of at-risk students are the first of their families
to attend college. In addition to socializing these students
into the milieu they are entering, pairing them with
faculty and/or student mentors increases the likelihood
of a "bond" with the institution and a stronger personal
commitment to program completion. Students who
regularly associate with faculty, staff, and other students
who have successfully completed similar academic or
preparatory courses, will establish relationships that
stimulate and reinforce positive student behaviors.

Late registration should be abolished. Colleges that
abolish the policy of late registration have first asked
two critical questions: How will this decision affect
enrollment? and How will this decision affect retention?
Advertising a policy change and decreasing the number
of late registration days over two or three enrollment
periods, until late registration ends the day before classes
officially begin, will provide adequate notice for those
students who habitually register late. Some colleges
report that more than 20 percent of their student body
will enroll during the late registration period. Attrition
data indicate that students who enroll late in one or more
courses are more likely to either withdraw from the
course(s) or earn a failing grade than students who
register on time.

Basic skills assessment and placement should be
mandatory. High school GPA is no longer the best
indicator and predictor of student readiness for college
work, and colleges must require entry-level assessment
of all entering students to determine if skill levels are
adequate for college-level courses. Test data should be used to keep students from enrolling in classes where they have no chance of success and to place them in classes where their skills could be developed to appropriate levels.

Eliminate dual enrollment in basic skill and regular academic courses. Students should not be permitted to enroll in any courses that would require a skill level that initial assessment has determined the student has not yet achieved. Many current and proposed state-legislated mandates require that students failing college entrance skill tests must successfully complete appropriate remediation/development courses prior to enrolling in regular courses; in some states, failure to comply with these requirements can lead to student probation or expulsion, and in others, state funding for programs and institutions may be tied to compliance/enforcement and student performance.

Working students should be strongly encouraged to reduce academic loads. The national average for degree attainment at a community college is now three or more years; for four-year colleges and universities, it is now five years or more. More students are working more hours to continue their studies, and colleges should encourage students to reduce their academic loads to better accommodate the demands of work, family, and college. It is a disservice to students to encourage full or sizable academic loads when they report working more than 30 hours a week or juggling family and household responsibilities.

Provide more comprehensive financial aid opportunities. Abandoning academic goals is the likely alternative chosen by students who are overburdened with impending, growing debts and who cannot find additional financial support. Financial aid opportunities should be made available to students in classrooms and mentoring sessions as well as in the traditional recruitment and registration procedures. Moreover, hiring students to work on campus will keep them in better touch with faculty and peers, and involved with activities in a college setting.

Require problem-solving and literacy activities in all courses. Faculty report that when they confer with other faculty whose courses are linked programmatically to their own, they can better design curriculum and instruction that incorporate improved reading, writing, and thinking skill development activities. Furthermore, they can more readily identify the common elements that link their courses, discuss the strategies by which they can share these elements with their students, and agree upon common measures by which to evaluate the quality of the products of these interdisciplinary literacy activities.

Evaluate student and program outcomes regularly and disseminate the findings. Past research has shown that evaluation and dissemination are generally weak program components; the majority of programs in the present study, however, had carefully developed and implemented evaluation policies and procedures. Evaluation designs were built to measure the accomplishment of or failure of specific goals, and results were written in specific terms that clearly described the accomplishments and their significance to students and the institution. Moreover, results were disseminated to critical recipients of evaluation data—those within the institution, such as students, faculty, and administrators; and those outside, such as legislators and other potential sources of funding and support.

Summary

The at-risk student population will not go away; addressing its challenges should not be postponed and cannot be ignored. Discussions about "how best to do it" should be replaced with "beginning somewhere and doing it now." While the majority of the programs investigated were designed to serve a limited number of students and/or a well-defined group, the critical pieces that make them successful could well support expansion to the broader student population.

All those working in community colleges are caught between a rock and a hard place, as surely as is America. The gaps in education and in society between preparedness and demand are serious, but while the news is bad, the situation is not hopeless unless community colleges refuse to apply to the current situation the same level of courage and creativity successfully applied to a myriad of other challenges.

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Editor’s Note: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The At-Risk Student in the Open-Door College (Roueche, John E. and Roueche, Suanne D. Washington, DC: The Community College Press, 1993) will be featured on “Author, Author!” a special program in the PBS Adult Learning Series, March 31, 11:00-12:00 a.m. Eastern time. (Check local listings for the time in your area.) Jerry Owens, president of Cuyahoga Community College, will serve as moderator as the authors discuss their study and findings using video clips from selected college programs.

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