

High School Graduation Rates of Potential First Generation College Students: A Qualitative Case Study

Jacqueline O. Dansby and Gloria Dansby-Giles

Jacqueline O. Dansby, Director, Upward Bound and Adjunct Faculty, St. Mary's University
Gloria Dansby-Giles, Professor, Department of Counseling, Jackson State University

Abstract

Educational reform in the United States has focused on several factors such as academic achievement, performance on standardized test scores, dropout rates, the mandate of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Dee and Jacob, 2010) and other changes. A new call for a broader and bolder strategy for educational reform that focused on enrichment programs, workshops for parents and school health services was issued by Steen and Noguera, 2010. They also encouraged school counselors to seek out and connect with programs in the community that offered enrichment activities outside of school hours.

Given the importance of out of school enrichment programs, this presentation explores the experiences, practices and perceptions of first generation college students that enhanced their desire to remain in school and graduate. In addition, it will examine the influence of academic factors and practices as well as extracurricular experiences and participation in Upward Bound, a special enrichment program, on their graduation rate.

Introduction

In an era that emphasizes the need for students to become competitive in a global society as well as earn a college degree, high school graduation rates in the United States are troubling; the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that over a half million students have left school before graduation during each year over the past decade (McCallumore and Sparapani, 2010). Every school day, more than 7,200 students exit American public high schools without a diploma; the majority of dropouts are impoverished minorities who are likely to attend large, urban schools (Swanson, 2010). Children living in poverty tend to be concentrated in low-performing schools staffed by underprepared teachers (Murnane, 2007). It is estimated that more than a quarter of all students and over forty percent of Hispanic and African American students do not graduate from high school on time; the majority of students that fail to graduate with their peers are likely to dropout (Legters and Balfanz, 2010).

A profile of 2008-09 dropouts in Baltimore schools shows that almost half (48.2%) of dropouts were ninth graders, 25.4% were in the tenth grade and remaining dropouts were nearly evenly divided between the eleventh and twelfth grades (MacIver, 2011). Almost three in four

dropouts were seventeen years of age or older (MacIver, 2011). Most dropouts (79.2%) exceeded the normal age for their grade level (MacIver, 2011). Dropouts were more likely to be male (57%) than female (43%); female dropouts earned more credits (6.0) than their male counterparts (4.7) (MacIver, 2011). Disproportionately, dropouts were more likely to be in special education (29.3%) in comparison to the representation of special education students among all high school students (16.7%) or among graduates (11.2%) for the same school year (MacIver, 2011).

Specifically, the nation's largest minority group, Latina/o students make up 23.1 percent of the population that is under 18 years of age (Johnson, 2011). In contrast, the dropout rate among Latina/o students in 2009 was 9.2 percent compared with 3.9 percent for whites and 6.6 percent for blacks, according to the Pew Hispanic Center (Johnson, 2011).

A myriad of research studies forecast a dismal future for adolescent, African American males in public schools. Typically lagging behind their peers academically, African American males tend to be underrepresented in rigorous academic programs, e.g., advanced placement courses or activities for gifted and talented children, and more likely to be placed in programs for the learning disabled (Laura, 2011). With social and economic challenges posed by conditions of poverty that may be combined with a lack of discipline, inadequate schooling too frequently becomes a pipeline to privatized prisons for a disproportionate number of young African American males (Laura 2011).

The impact of this graduation crisis disproportionately affects the nation's most vulnerable youth (Swanson, 2010). Students who leave school without a diploma pay a steep price for dropping out (Educational Testing Service, 2005; Orfield, 2004). The consequences of dropping out of high school has the potential to increase the likelihood that youth without a diploma may become entrapped in a permanent underclass including increased rates of unemployment, lower wages and greater rates of incarceration (The Education Trust, 2005). While there are some exceptions and not every dropout faces a bleak future, the disadvantages, however, are substantial in a nation whereby the lack of a high school diploma can prevent entry into many highly skilled jobs and white collar professions (Menzer and Hampel, 2009). Our society also pays a high price when youth do not graduate through higher crime rates, increased need for public assistance, fewer tax dollars, and lower participation in voting (Menzer and Hampel, 2009).

According to a study from Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, "Diplomas Count", the United States is showing gradual signs of increasing graduation rates for 2008 after two decades of decline; however, persistent gaps in graduation rates exist for students from minority backgrounds in comparison with their more advantaged counterparts (Swanson, 2011). High school graduation rates are affected by a multitude of factors. Recent research has identified promising practices that may be utilized by schools to improve high school graduation rates as well as indicators that may serve as early warning signals to prevent students from dropping out of school. Through the Colorado Graduates Initiative (CGI), a shared strategic

approach that may serve as a useful model for other states to implement as they seek to address alarming graduation rates, seven key practices were determined as crucial factors to increase high school graduation rates in schools within the state: (1) leadership to galvanize stakeholders to support and work toward the attainment of mutual goals; (2) decision-making driven by data, especially early warning indicators; (3) involvement of district leaders toward addressing student data related to behavioral dropout characteristics and early warning indicators; (4) external support to enable districts to objectively review their policies and practices regarding dropout indicators; (5) a systematic framework with steps to facilitate dropout prevention; (6) simultaneous efforts toward shaping policy related to dropout prevention and recovery at the state level; and (7) commitment by all stakeholders to the perpetuation of a community of learning that includes inquiry (MacIver, 2011). Several years preceding their untimely departure from school without a diploma, dropouts were found to have exhibited the behavioral warning signs of unacceptable attendance, behavioral problems, and failure in courses (MacIver, 2011).

Both supported and disliked, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated educational accountability based largely on the system used by Texas schools with the justification that the state's educational gains could serve as a model for the nation (Giambo, 2010). To improve graduation rates, high schools tend to use performance data to track students' progress, identify potential dropouts, and provide appropriate intervention (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010).

Utilizing advances in technology, a Minneapolis, Minnesota school district's data "dashboard" makes it convenient for school administrators to monitor whether students are on track as they progress through high school and, more specifically, identifies indicators, e.g., chronic absenteeism and whether students are passing courses as well as state mandated exams (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010). For instance, a high school principal found that many disadvantaged students lived almost seven miles from the school and that these students had no other alternative except to rely on public transportation since the district lacked bus service (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010). Further, it was discovered that faculty who had been teaching at the school for twenty to thirty years were oblivious of the reality that some parents were in the position of having to make a decision whether to send their children to school or buy food (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010). After becoming aware of this barrier to school success, the district managed to intervene and supplement bus fare for students that received free or reduced price meals (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010). This intervention had an unanticipated effect of having helped raise the expectations of parents, too, for their children to graduate (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010). Data can be effectively used to capture unique circumstances occurring in a student's life and serve as an early warning system so that crucial intervention can occur in an expedited manner (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010). A challenge for educational administrators is to ensure that usable data are provided to school personnel who most need it and that teachers are provided with information and/or professional development in regard to effective interventions and strategies (Dakarai and Sawchuk, 2010). Having responsible and caring adults reaching out to students in need makes a meaningful difference.

Additional indicators that have been found to serve as early warning signals that can threaten graduation among at-risk high school seniors are (a) the size of the school, (b) low proficiency levels, particularly failing grades in mathematics and English, (c) behavioral problems such as several suspensions from school and truancy, (d) issues related to family, e.g., caring for siblings, other relatives, or a student's own children, (e) finances, (f) physical and mental health and (g) mobility, i.e., frequent instances of moving in and out of the district (Menzer and Hampel, 2009; MacIver, 2011). Studies show a positive relationship between academic failure and decreased motivation, which consequently has a direct effect on the tendency to dropout (MacIver, 2011). While interviews with non-graduating seniors, indeed, revealed low motivation and work ethic in some cases, the study also discovered that personal hardships prevented some students from completing high school requirements on time (Menzer and Hampel, 2009). Also of importance, a survey of teacher attitudes toward their school's graduation rate found few instances of the use of fresh, cutting edge approaches with respect to teaching or testing in order to engage students and enhance their success (Menzer and Hampel, 2009). Survey results also showed that teachers seldom have conversations with students with the deliberate intent to listen in order to learn from them about their performance; instead, communication from teachers with their students frequently involved exhorting, advising and telling students what to do (Menzer and Hampel, 2009).

Accountability practices which include high stakes testing have been mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (Heilig, 2011). A longitudinal study to investigate the progress and graduation rates of over 45,000 high school students in the Houston Independent School District revealed evidence that students that left school without a diploma were severely under-reported and graduation rates exaggerated (Heilig, 2011). A growing body of research shows a detrimental effect of high stakes testing on high school graduation rates of youth who are likely to be potential first generation college students (Bracey, 2009). A study that compared eighteen states that required students to pass a mandated exit exam as a prerequisite for graduation with thirty-three states without such a requirement has found that high stakes testing is associated with lower high school graduation rates and college entrance exam scores (Viadero, 2005). Research also has shown that high stakes testing tends to have a differential effect on students based on race and ethnicity, i.e., Hispanic and African American students from low-income families have less probability of satisfying graduation requirements than their white counterparts from a more advantaged socioeconomic status (Borg, Plumlee and Stranahan, 2007). Interestingly, research also shows a relationship between school characteristics and the probability of high school graduation rates; students that attend high schools which hire more teachers with advanced degrees or offer a magnet program tend to earn higher scores on state mandated standardized tests (Borg, Plumlee and Stranahan, 2007).

Within recent years, educational research has identified several promising models for school reform that have had a positive impact on high school graduation rates, e.g., the facilitation of small, personalized environments within schools (Kuo, 2010). For example, research has

identified the presence of following best practices in high schools having a diverse population where students consistently outperform students in schools with similar demographics: (1) a clear and precise focus on rigor that is put into practice; (2) capacity to implement innovation; (3) open and transparent communication within the school and the larger community; and (4) the motivation and capability to use a state of the art evidence to make strategic decisions (Wilcox and Angelis, 2011). However, the next phase of school reform is filled with exciting possibilities (Kuo, 2010). Smart, bold reform is needed that fosters improvement, innovation and intervention to address achievement gaps (Cahill, 2009). To improve outcomes for students, the early identification of at-risk students is crucial (Sparks, 2010). In the process of identifying students that have failed state mandated tests of proficiency required for graduation, interventions must take into account the relationship between poverty and academic failure (Nichols, 2003). Through a combination of school wide reforms with interventions that focus on attendance, behavior and extra help for students, graduation rates can be increased considerably (Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver, 2007).

Jobs for the Future, an educational group, proposes that schools can reduce dropout rates and, thereby, improve graduation rates through curriculum alignment, college preparedness, and ongoing support after high school graduation (Steinberg and Allen, 2011). Research also has documented the benefits of the bold idea known as Early College High Schools Initiative started in 2002 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Berger, Adelman and Cole, 2010). By blending high school and college to compress the length of time required to complete a high school diploma and the first two years of college, a growing number of dropout recovery programs across the nation are finding that early college high schools help at-risk youth from low-income families to remain engaged in school while placing them on a successful path to postsecondary education (Steinberg and Allen, 2011). Early college graduation rates exceed the national average, i.e., 92% in comparison to 69% (Steinberg and Allen, 2011).

The first national college access and retention programs to address the serious social and cultural barriers to education in America, TRIO Programs consist of the following set of educational opportunity programs that serve to increase access and retention in postsecondary among traditionally underrepresented and underserved populations: Regular Upward Bound, Veteran's Upward Bound, Math/Science Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Ronald McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs, and the TRIO Dissemination Partnership. Participants in TRIO Programs tend to come from low-income families, may be among the first generation within their family to earn a baccalaureate degree, and/or may be disabled. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, more than 2,800 TRIO Programs serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds throughout the nation ranging from the sixth grade through college graduation. Using a student centered approach, services include the provision of instruction in a rigorous curriculum including academic tutoring; academic, career and personal counseling; financial literacy and guidance; mentoring; and other support for the successful completion of secondary

school and educational access and retention in higher education. TRIO Programs provide professional development to enable competent and caring staff to more effectively deliver services to participants using state of the art practices.

Established in 1964 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson as part of his strategy for War on Poverty, Upward Bound initially was created by the Educational Opportunity Act of 1964 as an experimental program to increase access and retention in higher education among underrepresented populations. Specifically, Upward Bound seeks to generate the motivation and skills necessary for participants to successfully complete high school and pursue higher education until completion. Participants tend to come from low-income families and/or are potential first general college students. Upward Bound has an organizational culture of being a family of college-bound youth.

Albert Bandura's Theory on Social Learning serves as the theoretical framework on which this study is based. Bandura asserts that individuals learn vicariously through the observation of models (Bandura, 1974). Bandura further postulates that self-efficacy is the perceived belief possessed by an individual that he/she has the capacity to exert performance that will influence events in his/her life (Bandura, 1974). This study seeks to increase understanding of perceived influences on high school graduation rates by investigating the lived experiences of potential first generation college students through listening to their voices.

Significance of the Study

Behind every early warning indicator signaling a student at risk for leaving school without a diploma is a face and a story (MacIver, 2011). By listening to the voices of students, educators and policymakers can better understand factors that contribute to the presence of indicators identified largely through an analysis of quantitative data. This study is significant in that much of the research that has been associated with educational reform has focused on quantitative data. To increase understanding of factors that may influence high school graduation rates among potential first generation college students, this study investigates the perceptions of students impacted by educational reform so that their voices may become part of the conversation among stakeholders, provide broader understanding of underlying experiences that may shape existing behavioral patterns, and stimulate ideas about increasingly effective interventions to spur the next wave of reform.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived influence of academic factors, extracurricular experiences, behavioral patterns, attendance tendencies and school practices that

either strengthen or inhibit the desire of potential first generation college students to remain in high school and graduate. A secondary purpose of this study is to examine the perceived influence of participation in a special academic program, Upward Bound, on the high school graduation rate of potential first generation college students.

Research Questions

1. What were academic factors, extracurricular experiences, behavioral patterns, attendance tendencies and school practices that strengthened or inhibited the desire of potential first generation college students to remain in high school and graduate?
2. What was the perceived influence of participation in Upward Bound on the high school graduation rate of potential first generation college students?

Operational Definitions

Potential first generation college student is defined operationally as a student that (a) has not matriculated into an institution of higher education as a degree seeking student and for whom (b) neither parent with whom the student resides has attained a baccalaureate degree or higher. Potential first generation college students are more likely to be low-income in comparison to their counterparts who reside with one or more parents that have earned a baccalaureate degree or higher. These students also are likely to be underserved.

Upward Bound summer bridge program is defined operationally as the final level of participation in the Upward Bound Program at St. Mary's University whereby students who are recent high school graduates (i.e., in June 2011) enrolled in college credit prior to their matriculation to the college of their choice as a degree seeking student in the fall 2011 semester.

Limitations

This study investigates the perceptions of students who persisted and graduated from high school in order to understand characteristics of students who are potential first generation students that did not become dropouts. Therefore, participants of this study do not include dropouts, although several participants acknowledged that they easily could have dropped out of school without support from Upward Bound and caring high school teachers and administrators.

Population

The population of this study consisted of 22 participants that graduated in the 2011 class of their high school and enrolled in the summer bridge program of the Upward Bound Program at St. Mary's University.

Sample

The sample consisted of nine Upward Bound participants, who graduated in the 2011 class of their respective high school, and participated in the summer bridge program. Participants in the study were 18 years old or older who participated in the Upward Bound at St. Mary's University, a pre-college program with a focus on academic enrichment. A convenience sample consisting of 9 students were interviewed from the population of 22 summer bridge students.

Research Design

The research design for the study was a qualitative case study. The study met the requirements of a case study as described by Stake (2005), which are a focus on a particular issue, the restriction of the study to a particular context (a pre-college enrichment program, i.e., the Upward Bound at St. Mary's University) and within a particular time frame. Creswell (2007) adds additional characteristics of the case study such as studying the cases for a period of time, gathering detailed data and the use of several kinds of data such as "observations, interviews, audio visual materials, documents and reports" (p. 73).

Using semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the perceived influence of academic factors, extracurricular experiences, behavioral patterns, attendance tendencies and school practices that strengthened or inhibited the desire of potential first generation college students to remain in high school and graduate. In addition, the perceived influence of participation in Upward Bound on the high school graduation rate of potential first generation college students was examined.

After having received approval from Institutional Review Board, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form. In addition, the informed consent form was explained orally and the participants were sent a copy of this instrument by e-mail. Nine participants that submitted a signed, informed consent form were asked to participate in an interview conducted in person and a follow-up. There was no incentive for participating in the study.

Initially, the participants were asked questions related to demographics such as gender, grade-point average, ACT/SAT scores, and graduation from high school. The interview

questions are on file. The researcher recorded responses from the interviews on an interview protocol.

Data examined in this study included the following: (A) initial and follow-up interviews with the participants; (B) transcriptions from the videotaped interviews; (C) researcher's notes from the interviews; (D) A journal that was kept of the interviews by the researcher; and (E) documents from the participants' files such as letters, photographs, honors and awards.

The results from the interviews were labeled as "Participant A through I." The decoded list of the names of the participants that corresponds to the alphabets is kept in a locked file cabinet. In addition, the researcher's notes and journal also are kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. The results of the study do not disclose the names of the participants.

The results of the study have been organized into a holistic analysis whereby specific themes related to maintaining continuous enrollment in high school and factors that assisted with that process. This analysis is related to the context which is the participation in the Upward Bound Program at St. Mary's University.

To achieve credibility of the study as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), attention was given to interviewing the participants and triangulating of the data. The data were triangulated by obtaining several sources of information: (A) interviews of the participants; (B) researcher's notes during the interview; (C) researcher's journal; (D) documents such as letters, honors and awards, etc. related to the participants.

To achieve validation, the investigator identified themes that developed from the study according to Eisner, 1991. In addition, to the identification of themes, the investigator searched for results that may have disconfirmed the themes. Other forms of validation employed as offered by Creswell (2007) were to spend time with the participants and earn their trust as well as checking information with the participants to ensure that it was correct.

Results

What were academic factors, extracurricular experiences, behavioral patterns, attendance tendencies and school practices that strengthened or inhibited the desire of potential first generation college students to remain in high school and graduate?

Academic Factors

Most students interviewed knew a potential first generation college student personally who had dropped out of high school. Several participants perceived that some students dropped out of school because they were lazy and didn't want to do the work. However, respondents cited cases whereby students dropped out because they had serious personal or family problems and felt that

they had no other recourse. In some cases students on the verge of dropping out of high school were reported to have sought assistance from administrators. However, if the unique circumstances of these students did not fit prescribed policies, students wished policies could be more flexible but interrupted their education.

Several students reported feeling a disconnection between the material they were taught in the classroom and the subject matter on mandated tests of accountability. The majority of students stated that enthusiastic teachers make them want to learn. They wished all teachers would show passion for teaching their subject matter. Students reported that they respond well to caring teachers that show a willingness to help them.

Respondents yearned for counselors at their school who were available to counsel them rather than being too busy doing paperwork assigned by administrators. Several students recounted instances where they made several visits to see their high school counselor and was told to come back because the counselor was busy with testing or other duties. When these students returned at the scheduled time, they reported that the counselor was still too busy to see them. After making several other unsuccessful attempts to see their counselor, these students stated that they eventually gave up the idea of seeking assistance from their counselor and sought other avenues to try to get the help needed.

Several participants perceived that their teachers do not teach any new material after the Texas Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (TAKS), the state mandated exam, and Advanced Placement (AP) tests have been given. Participants of the study perceived that they typically watch movies in classes after the TAKS or AP exam has been administered. If students are assigned work by teachers after the administration of the TAKS or AP exam, the participants in the study often perceived assignments to be busy work but not challenging or covering new concepts.

Extracurricular Activities

Schools that Upward Bound students attended have a “No Pass, No Play” policy regarding participation in extracurricular activities. Since students themselves choose the extracurricular activities in which they participate, they have a personal interest and, thereby, are likely to be intrinsically motivated to be involved. This “No Pass, No Play” policy served as extrinsic motivation for students to maintain acceptable grades.

Students stated that band directors in particular and sponsors of other organizations monitored their grades and were likely to intercede as advocates for them with other teachers when they experienced difficulty communicating with teachers. Since the band directors and other sponsors were colleagues with other teachers, they played a pivotal role toward helping

students get assistance needed to better understand material and improve their classroom performance.

Because students spent a substantial number of hours involved in extracurricular activities, they tended to develop a positive, working relationship with their sponsors based on mutual respect that they perceived to be personal. They valued this relationship and perceived that it enhanced their level of comfort in communicating openly and honestly with band directors and other organizational sponsors.

Students cited that they often learned valuable life lessons through their participation in extracurricular activities. One participant in the study said that band taught her to surpass any challenges. Another participant in the study stated that soccer taught him to push past limits physically, spiritually and mentally. Students indicated that they used these lessons to help them overcome other obstacles in life and to achieve goals in other areas of their life.

A participant who competed in the National Oceanic Science Bowl perceived that the experience of competing against other teams in her state encouraged her to more seriously pay attention to learning science. Another participant perceived that she liked the feeling she got when she performed community service. A participant who served on the yearbook staff but couldn't afford a camera spoke of the lasting impact that the sponsor made upon her by giving her a camera so she could participate in the class on the same basis as other students and without having to feel embarrassed because of being poor.

Behavioral Patterns

One participant in the study that had had disciplinary action administered by her high school made the observation that school officials should not leave students alone in a room with their parents unless the officials are reasonably sure that the parents know how to engage in responsible problem solving. Sometimes students are scared when their parents are very angry at them and think that they are going to end up homeless. They wished that administrators would consider the possibility that some parents may become physically and/or emotionally abusive to the child at home.

Attendance

Several participants in the study cited a reason that some students dropout is because they don't understand the subject matter in one or more classes, get too far behind to pass, and reason that there is no use for staying in school. These students eventually felt that they were wasting their time by staying in school. Some participants in the study perceived that some students with learning disabilities, e.g., dyslexia and ADHD, did not get help when they experienced trouble in

their classes. Several participants in the study knew potential first generation college students who had dropped out due to pressures to work and help support their family.

One participant in the study stated that more students would dropout if doing so wasn't punishable by law; students dreaded having to face a judge in court. Other perceived reasons that potential first generation college students left school is because of (a) drugs, (b) some went to alternative schools and (c) some sought educational options that they thought were easier. Several participants in the study perceived that they were more likely to attend school if they felt a sense of being connected through extracurricular activities.

School Practices

In terms of quality, participants in the study generally perceived magnet schools to have higher quality than the other parts of the school and wished that the same quality existed throughout a school. Participants perceived that students attending magnet schools were challenged more and wanted to see regular students do the same amount of work as students in magnet schools. Several participants in the study suggested that schools could curb the dropout problem if they could be more flexible and meet the unique needs of students instead of having policies that essentially are one-size-fits-all in nature.

Participants in the study understood the reason for having rigid policies but pointed out that there should be some room for addressing unique circumstances. Participants wanted to see schools put the needs of students first over an emphasis on policies. Examples: Tardy Round-up and rules enforced inconsistently, e.g., dress code. Participants in the study observed that school personnel behave differently when visitors are present, particularly personnel from the school district. Several participants in the study yearned for schools to be a place where the primary emphasis is placed on learning rather than blind adherence to following. When school personnel focused more on following rules rather than learning, participants in the study perceived the effect to be a barrier to increased graduation rates.

Several participants in the study would like to see schools become more organized when ordering AP exams to ensure that there are enough exams on the day of the test. If fewer test booklets were available than the actual number of students that wanted to take the AP exam, some students were unable to take the exam.

The majority of participants felt that an overemphasis on the state mandated test discouraged students and had a detrimental effect of graduation rates. Participants perceived that an unacceptable score on the End-of-Credit Exam could cause them to fail a course even though they had satisfactorily completed all other requirements for a class.

Practices that enhanced the desire of students to remain in school and graduate include the following factors: participants in the study preferred having classes on A & B days instead of having seven or eight classes on the same day. Having classes on A & B days gives students more time to do work and to ask teachers for help because the classes are longer. Participants felt that they were less likely to turn in work late if classes were on A & B days.

With budget cuts, participants in the study perceived that decision-makers often eliminated activities that encouraged students to remain in school. One participant cited that when football was discontinued at her school, students lost a sense of pride and happiness. These feelings had the effect of decreasing motivation.

Several participants in the study perceived that some school administrators interacted with students from a culture of intimidation. Participants perceived the effect of intimidation as an inhibitor to increased graduation rates.

Other practices that participants perceived that their school did particularly well were getting recognized for students performed well on TAKS. Participants in the study especially felt that the practice of offering TAKS and AP preparation on Super Saturdays was an effective practice. On Super Saturdays, students can receive tutoring if they have previously scored low on the TAKS test or need assistance to prepare to take the AP exam. Schools used incentives to encourage students to attend Super Saturdays, e.g., held drawings for door prizes, served pizzas, provided free transportation, etc.

Credit recovery allowed students to make up work although participants felt that some students merely went through the motions without really learning the subject matter. Participants in the study perceived that it is relatively easy for students to tune out a computer.

Participants became animated and their eyes sparkled when they talked about having teachers, counselors, and a magnet school director that they perceived to be really cool and with whom they could talk and relate. Participants in the study felt that these school officials mentored them, showed students that they genuinely cared, and truly wanted students to succeed in school.

The majority of participants in the study preferred teachers that reached out to them rather than choosing to wait for the student to ask for help whenever a problem existed. Participants perceived that teachers who typically reached out to students were adept at observing body language and generally would ask if everything was alright. Students perceived that they could go to these teachers in the future if they subsequently needed help.

What was the perceived influence of participation in Upward Bound on the high school graduation rate of potential first generation college students?

Academic Factors

Participants in the study recognized that the mission of Upward Bound was to prepare them to successfully complete high school and to pursue higher education until graduation. They perceived that the educational opportunities afforded by Upward Bound gave them distinct academic advantages over their peers and enabled them to improve their academic performance in high school. Participants in the study felt that Upward Bound prepared them to succeed academically in college; participants particularly felt that their science classes taught by tenured, full professors at St. Mary's University were rigorous and prepared them for college.

One student said that prior to being enrolled in Upward Bound, she was satisfied with earning grades of C. Now that she has the aspiration of being the first in their family to earn a college degree, she stated that she has started making the honor roll and no longer is satisfied with making grades of C in her high school courses.

Prior to their enrollment in Upward Bound, some participants in the study were satisfied with earning a regular diploma to graduate. Several participants in the study cited that they made the decision after their enrollment in Upward Bound to graduate with a distinguished diploma.

Extracurricular Activities

Participants in the study perceived that Upward Bound encouraged and supported their active participation in high school extracurricular activities.

Attendance

Participants in the study said that they never considered dropping out of high school after enrolling in Upward Bound because they didn't want to be withdrawn from the program for any reason.

Behavioral Patterns

Participants in the study perceived that they felt closer to students at their high school who also were enrolled in Upward Bound than their counterparts who were not enrolled in the program. Participants shared that a cluster of students enrolled in Upward Bound would sit together at their high school during lunch and regularly spend time together. Upward Bound participants would support each other at their high school and behave as a family.

School Policies

The Upward Bound Director serves as an advocate for participants at their high schools. Participants in the study perceived that they would like for their high schools to be more like Upward Bound.

Summary

Consistent with Albert Bandura's Theory on Social Learning, participants in the study identified the following factors perceived to positively influence high school graduation rates among potential first generation college students: administrators and teachers who (a) genuinely care about students, (b) communicate well with students, (c) reach out to them and offer assistance with homework or problems, and (d) show passion in teaching their subject matter. Students perceived that they could talk to these administrators and teachers if they had problems.

Potential first generation college students perceived that extracurricular activities help students to remain engaged in learning as well as help them feel a sense of connectedness to the school. Relationships that students develop with the sponsors of extracurricular activities provide bridges to help students navigate impasses with other teachers through advocacy. Students learn valuable life lessons through their participation in extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities tend to increase motivation and, thereby, increase the likelihood that potential first generation college students will stay on track and graduate. Meaningful involvement in extracurricular activities tends to reduce (a) absenteeism and (b) behavioral problems. The "No Pass, No Play" policy is perceived to increase the odds that potential first generation college students who engage in extracurricular activities will be more likely will graduate from high school.

Participants in the study want to learn and to be challenged academically so they can meet competitive admissions criteria for higher education. Students want the emphasis of high schools to be more about learning than about blindly following rules. Students want schools to have enough textbooks on the first day of class so they can learn. (Students made the observation that if they don't receive textbooks on the first day of school, they are unlikely to receive one for the rest of the school year.) Students resoundingly felt that they learn better when teachers are passionate about their subject matter.

Participants perceive that flexible school policies that allow administrators and teachers to address the unique needs of individual students could serve to retain more potential first generation students in school until graduation. In the future, schools may need to consider ways to hire more social workers and retention specialists to provide more timely intervention to students that have been identified through an early alert system as exhibiting unacceptable academic performance, chronic absenteeism and/or behavioral problems. As a strategy to increase high school graduation rates, schools may partner and work closely with TRIO

Programs such as Upward Bound to reach students that otherwise may fall through the cracks in the educational system.

Participants in the study identified the following factors that negatively influenced high school graduation rates among the potential first generation college: (1) school administrators and teachers who fail to recognize that some potential first generation college students carry heavy burdens, experience hardships, and need assistance finding solutions for addressing personal and/or family problems; (2) school administrators and teachers perceived to approach their responsibilities from a culture of intimidation; (3) feelings of uncertainty and fear encountered by potential first generation college students in response to disciplinary action; (4) lack of a responsible, caring adult with whom potential first generation college students feel that they can communicate and seek advice and assistance when problems arise.

Whether students' perceptions are correct or incorrect, administrators, counselors and teachers can better impact graduation rates through an awareness that when youths believe that the behavior of school personnel is less than authentic, they sometimes interpret the behavior as hypocrisy. Better communication between students and school personnel can prevent or minimize the occurrence of misperceptions. If the perception of hypocrisy is left unaddressed, mistrust can develop and school personnel consequently may be less able to inspire and motivate students to achieve their highest potential.

Participants in the study perceived that Upward Bound provided academic support through offering a rigorous curriculum that supports their high school requirements for graduation. Upward Bound gives students hope and raises their level of aspiration. Participants perceived that the organizational culture of Upward Bound being a "*family*" provides crucial social support and a sense of stability for participants that sometimes are not available within their home environments.

Students enrolled in Upward Bound are surrounded by caring adults who genuinely want participants to succeed. Educational services provided by Upward Bound occur in a small, close knit community that allow faculty and staff to know each student personally. Once enrolled in Upward Bound, participants perceived that they changed previous patterns of self-defeating behavior because they didn't want to engage in any adverse behavior that might cause them to be dropped from the program.

Participants developed friends in Upward Bound who had similar educational and career goals. Participants ate lunch and spent time at school with their friends in Upward Bound. Friends in Upward Bound became a support system at their high school that provided a buffer against family, personal or school difficulties. Participants in the study wished that their school could be more like Upward Bound.

When students receive disciplinary actions at their high school, they wish that schools would treat them with sensitivity and realize that they may get abused or severely punished

afterwards by their parents when they go home. They wish that administrators would recognize that it may not be expedient to leave a student alone with his/her parents when the parents are angry. Students conveyed their fear and vulnerability that they may end up homeless if their parents should force them to leave the family's residence. They sometimes feel that they have no one who listens to them and truly understands their feelings except their peers, who haven't figured out life either. Therefore, when they make mistakes, it sometimes may result from the circumstance that youth from low-income backgrounds sometimes have limited familiarity with the mores of middle class society and, thereby, may make mistakes through a process of trial and error; in such cases, there was no malicious intent on the student's part to make the wrong choice.

Conclusion

The results of this study may serve as an example for educational programs similar to Upward Bound as well as inform educational administrators, counselors, teachers, policymakers and other stakeholders of vital student perceptions that serve to provide deeper insights which promote increased understanding of underlying reasons from the perspective of students for the presence of dropout indicators. More important, student perceptions may provide insightful implications for identifying and implementing practical and effective interventions to increase graduation rates among potential first generation college students.

An urgent need exists for administrators, counselors and teachers to clearly understand both overt and covert reasons that students disengage from school and eventually dropout. In addition to current early warning indicators that have been identified, researchers are encouraged to investigate the extent to which the following factors may occur in the lives of potential first generation college students and influence their graduation rates: (a) a lack of sufficient positive role models in the homes and neighborhoods of students to help them learn effective problem-solving skills, self-discipline, and effective study techniques; (b) discord at home combined with a concern over the lack of financial resources that may make it difficult for students to concentrate or study; (c) lack of communication with parents or guardians including the incidence that some children may be termed as *latch key* whereby they may receive no parental or adult supervision after school; (d) experience of abuse, neglect or violence without receiving counseling or other mental health services; (e) lack of students' basic needs being met outside of school, particularly, whether students are experiencing homelessness and/or hunger and/or have untreated medical and dental needs as a result of a lack of finances in the family and nonexistent medical insurance; and (f) whether students are experiencing strong negative emotions including fear for safety due to experiences in the environment, e.g., bullying, cyber bullying, pressure to join a gang, potential to experience violence in high crime neighborhoods, peer pressure, etc.) Research verifies that stress can interfere with the ability to concentrate and consolidate memories. Therefore, if students are not getting some essential social, psychological and

emotional needs met at home and if schools should fail to recognize the extent to which these same unmet needs may influence academic performance, motivation, attendance and behavioral problems, the mere identification of early warning indicators does not in itself help educators understand the precise manner in which to address the problem of unacceptable graduation rates in a meaningful manner. Educators can best learn more about experiences in the daily lives of students by having authentic, caring, empathetic and responsible relationships with them and by truly listening to their voices as well as paying attention to their body language.

Participants in this study consistently noted that counselors frequently are unavailable to help them because of the performance of other assigned duties. After making several unsuccessful attempts to seek assistance from their counselors, some students may eventually give up their efforts altogether to talk to the school counselor. To improve graduation rates, schools are urged to find ways to alleviate some of the workload of counselors by hiring clerks or aides to assist with paperwork and/or utilize the services of interns (i.e., graduate students pursuing degrees in counseling) to increase the amount of time that can be spent providing one-on-one counseling services to students. Referrals from counselors can help students and their families obtain much needed services in the community for mental health, medical or dental treatment as needed. Counselors also can become a trusted, caring and empathetic adult to whom students can turn for responsible advice. By making students aware of options and opportunities as well as connecting students with appropriate resources in a timely manner, counselors can play a much more central role toward reducing the dropout rate.

When it becomes necessary to address behavioral problems, administrators, counselors and teachers are encouraged to remember their own adolescent years and realize the valuable opportunity to use improper behavior as a teachable moment to help students mentally process the relationship between their actions and consequences. Inside the physical body of an adolescent often are the emotions of a psychologically frightened and possibly damaged individual that may have an undisclosed history of having been abused. Disciplinary approaches may need to include counseling and or other mental health interventions.

Since teachers spend more time on a consistent basis with students than administrators or counselors, they are in a prime position to effectively exert influence that may serve to improve graduation rates. By genuinely listening to the voices of students and showing verbally and nonverbally that they care, communication barriers can be dissolved so that students are comfortable asking for help when they don't understand concepts. The simple act of caring by offering to help students who arrive early before school but don't understand how to do their homework means far more to a struggling student than a teacher may ever realize and helps students to remain engaged in school.

Teachers must be ever cognizant that student engagement is a common link toward providing a challenging and stimulating education for all students. Accordingly, teachers are in a key position to get students meaningfully engaged in learning by showing enthusiasm for

teaching their subject matter; maintaining positive, personalized, caring, authentic and personable student-teacher relationships; and having a focus on learning which may include remediation for some students, particularly in reading and math skills. Teachers must be encouraged to be more respectful in their interactions with students as well as greet them at the door as students enter class and are encountered in the hallways. To provide teachers with the repertoire of skills to improve graduation rates, professional development days should be devoted to emphasizing the importance of teaching and the review of state-of-the-art approaches to learning.

Educators must be ever cognizant that extracurricular activities can become a conduit by which some students will remain engaged in school that otherwise might lose interest and dropout. Extracurricular activities oftentimes become a channel through which students may learn self-discipline, healthy social skills, acquire positive role models (i.e., coaches, band directors, choir directors, club moderators, R.O.T.C. instructors, teachers, etc. that also may serve as advocates for students), improve their communication skills, and learn life-changing lessons that shape and build character. Since students choose the extracurricular activities in which they participate, it goes hand in hand that they tend to enjoy the activity and, thereby, are positively reinforced. As they can observe their own progress and continue to be reinforced, their self-esteem typically is raised. Consistent with Bandura's Theory of Social Learning, such students are likely to develop self-efficacy.

Schools tend to require students to meet academic, attendance and behavioral standards to maintain their participation in extracurricular activities. Accordingly, extracurricular activities not only have the potential to raise levels of motivation among students to encourage them to exert their best effort, but also may be the primary source of motivation to keep some students in school who otherwise might dropout. Educators should encourage students to become involved in an extracurricular activity in which they not only can feel fulfilled, but can develop a sense of connectedness to the school community by feeling acceptance and personally involved. If a club does not exist in an area where one or more students have expressed an interest, the creation of new clubs which meet the needs of students could become the means by which schools may reach out to students to help them become more engaged in learning.

It is helpful if sponsors of extracurricular activities can relate their activity to academics to ensure that students can see a connection and come to understand the interrelatedness of all knowledge. For example, mathematics is involved in music. Similar relationships can be found between academic subjects and other extracurricular activities.

In some instances, schools can become safe places that provide a temporary shelter for students as well as a buffer between some negative influences that may be encountered outside of school. Through the provision of free and reduced meals, schools sometimes may be the only time that some students in poverty may be able to count on receiving two regular meals on Monday through Friday during the school year. Abraham Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy of

Needs asserts that individuals must satisfy their most basic needs before they can focus on higher level needs such as self-actualization, i.e., to achieve one's full potential. Increasingly schools recently are recognizing that some students in poverty may not have regular meals on weekends or during the summer months.

To impact graduation rates, policy makers and administrators must possess the commitment to transform low-performing schools as well as create wide ranging intervention systems that provide comprehensive, targeted and intensive support to students both in and out of school. To meet the diverse needs of today's student population, policymakers and administrators must establish supportive, student-centered policies and allocate required resources needed for the implementation of innovative interventions.

Schools must be prepared to supply more useful information to students, teachers and parents to better enable them to work together as educational partners to ensure that appropriate interventions occur in a timely manner. Some parents with limited education may need assistance with developing more effective communication skills, stress management, and effective strategies for maintaining appropriate discipline within the home. Parents must be encouraged to regularly access teachers' online grade book to track the progress of their son(s) or daughter(s). If parents from low-income backgrounds do not have access to a computer or Internet service at home to communicate electronically with teachers and periodically monitor the progress of their children, schools must show cultural sensitivity and provide basic training in computer skills and allow them access to computers in the school library or advise them of the nearest public library to their residence. Parents that are actively involved in the education of their children can lend important support to the goal of increasing graduation rates.

Opportunities for credit recovery should be available to students both after school and in school to maximize choices that may better accommodate the diverse circumstances of today's students. Some students that have to work or board a bus immediately after school in order to avoid being stranded without transportation may be unable to take advantage of an after school credit recovery program. On the other hand, students whose only option for credit recovery is through an in school program may lose the benefit of being able to take electives or participate extracurricular activities that keep them engaged. In contrast to traditional classrooms where students previously have not succeeded, schools must offer the alternative of self-paced, online instruction with certified teachers nearby to provide assistance as needed; assessments for credit recovery should include essay as well as multiple choice items to ensure that students understand the material and are not simply guessing when responding with answers to objective items. New nontraditional options for earning a high school diploma would be helpful for over aged high school students, particularly for those aged 17 and older who already are entrenched in absenteeism and course failure including evening and Saturday classes as well as online instruction.

The majority of participants in the study conveyed the sentiment that they wished that their schools were more like Upward Bound. As schools look for exciting and effective practices to improve graduation rates, TRIO Programs have an illustrative history of success toward facilitating high school graduation among potential first generation college students. In particular, the Upward Bound Program at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas serves high school students that tend to be both potential first generation college students and from low-income families. The graduation rates of its participants exceed the national average for high school students. With more than forty years of experience motivating and educating potential first generation college students, best practices within Upward Bound may serve as a useful model for schools. A hallmark of Upward Bound is a combination of highly competent and genuinely caring faculty and staff whose passion inspires students and ignites their motivation. Learning in Upward Bound takes place in a positive, safe environment within a university community that values scholarship. Using a student-centered, holistic approach, Upward Bound seeks to meet the needs of the whole student through the provision of rigorous instruction in core academic subjects; personal, career and academic counseling; exposure to postsecondary opportunities through educational and cultural field trips; school advocacy; and cultivation of parental and family support for education.

An urgent need exists for courageous leadership to initiate bolder, more creative, and more wide ranging initiatives to better meet the diverse, serious and urgent needs of potential first generation college students and increase high school graduation rates. Educational leaders and policy makers must be genuinely committed to the practice of truly listening to the perceptions of students regarding policies that directly impact their lives and to include their voices in the public discourse about future directions of public school education, particularly in relation to the graduation crisis. To make a difference by increasing graduation rates, educators, policymakers and other stakeholders must continually work to build a solid sense of community so that positive changes are implemented and sustained over a long-term basis.

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