A Group by Any Other Name

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It is almost time for Stress Relief Week, and just about every university has one, but what is the point of these splashes in relaxation before exam week? Many studies have shown the negative correlation between high stress and low achievement, and the same correlation between low achievement and high attrition (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Phinney & Haas, 2003; Purnell & Blank, 2004; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). But does stress cause students to drop out, or is the stress a reflection of a deeper problem? Four year institutions, since the 1970’s and now many community colleges have invested millions of dollars in student programming, and services designed to reduce attrition by relieving academic, social, and personal stress (Patton, 2006). These line ups include, orientation/transition programs, learning communities, counseling services, mentoring programs, and faculty-student intervention programs. According to one study, counseling services have the weakest provable effect on retention while orientation or transition programs show the strongest (Patton, 2006). What is the difference? Perhaps it is because one is optional, requiring proactive utilization, while the other is required.

When studying attrition rates, demographically speaking, the most likely student to leave college, without a degree, is the minority male (Hermanowicz & NetLibrary, 2003; Ishitani, 2006; Rab, 2004). Interestingly enough, the same population is least likely to seek counseling for stress and personal problems (Kearney, Draper, & Barón, 2005). Historical research placed the responsibility of college retention on the student. Because of the statistics, it was easy to conclude, minority students, especially males, left college because the work was too academically demanding, or perhaps their world views did not place a high enough priority on the degree. Studies further characterized all leaving students as dropouts which implied a flaw, in
turn, led to a dangerous association between race, economic background, and deviation (Tinto, 1987).

Emphasis on student services, a historically back seat component of college life, mushroomed in the late 1980’s after the publication of Vincent Tinto’s, now famous book, *Leaving College*. Tinto asked readers to move away from student demographic paradigms of pre-college experience, or what the individual brings to the equation, and to examine the role that the campus experience played in student attrition. Tinto’s treatise expanded the view of responsibility for degree completion. While the student was still solely responsible for academic achievement, Tinto posited, the environment for achievement was the responsibility of the institution (Tinto, pg. 181). For Tinto, the universities that *could* were universities that placed higher emphasis on student experience, value systems, and institutional commitment, rather than on traditional formal structures of education (Tinto, pg. 182).

Tinto’s book was a necessary response to the radical sea change occurring in enrollment profiles during the 1970s. Before then, the common college student was white, entered post secondary education right after high school, attended full time, did not work, and had college educated parents who paid their tuition (Choy, 2002). Today, minority college students account for thirty percent of enrollment at public institutions, and nontraditional students account for over half of the population (Choy, 2002). For reasons relating to many factors not examined here, nontraditional students are also more likely to be minorities. Large urban universities and community colleges have therefore, suffered from higher attrition, and have been the most interest in intervention, without compromising the student’s responsibility for success (Tinto, pg. 182).
Since Tinto’s book, scholars have started digging deeper than demographics to discover why college students leave. Much of the research correlates low college grade point average (GPA) to high attrition (DeBerard et al., 2004; Purnell & Blank, 2004; Zajacova et al., 2005). The challenge is predicting who will achieve a high college GPA, before they start. It is statistically safe to say, across the whole population, the higher the high school GPA, the higher the college GPA; therefore, most colleges select students based on test performance and high school records (DeBerard et al., 2004). But the statistical conundrum is clear; why do so many students accepted with common performance history, wind up on divergent paths in higher education, and why do many more minorities, wind up on the path to system mortality?

Assuming that the same psychosocial variables existed when the students were excelling in high school, why do so many equally footed students leave college with a less than desirable GPA? What happens to them at the University?

According to more recent research, Albert Bandura’s perception of self-efficacy is key to understanding academic achievement in college (DeBerard et al., 2004). Self-efficacy is the positive belief in one’s ability to perform a task. A 2004 study published in the College Student Journal, hypothesized that health and psychosocial variables such as smoking, drinking, quality of life, social support, and maladaptive coping would all be related to retention, but found weak evidence to support this (DeBerard et al., 2004). If those variables had played a significant role, how would that explain the large numbers of students who have completed a degree with all of those predictive setbacks? What was discovered to be consistently true, was the higher the degree of self-efficacy, the higher the level of achievement and college GPA (DeBerard et al., 2004). While the findings greatly broadened the research in academic performance, the study used a very narrow and white demographic.
On the heels of that work, three Princeton researchers applied the research on academic self-efficacy to a large urban institution, comprised of mostly minority students, and discovered an even deeper twist. Self-efficacy was directly related to stress; the higher the stress, the lower the self-efficacy (Zajacova et al., 2005). For the first time, students were asked to rate the amount of stress they felt over a particular task like test taking, studying, or paper writing, and then they were asked to state the level at which they felt capable of performing the same task. Revealed in the data was evidence, that stress itself was not culpable for academic breakdown (Zajacova et al., 2005). Many students had stress about a particular task but still felt perfectly capable of completion. Those students were typically achievers. It was the students who showed low self-efficacy often partnered with high stress that suffered academic distress (Zajacova et al., 2005).

While stress is not responsible for poor performance, it can depress self-efficacy (Zajacova et al., 2005). Evidence leads to the conclusion that minority students and especially males suffer from greater attrition, because they are poorer academic performers. They do not perform well, because they lack internal belief in their capability; they lack self confidence in the task because they are stressed. The key is to explore the ingredients to minority stress and for institutions to give them the tools for coping. While academic stress certainly increases in college, a well selected high school performer is capable of the demands of a college education (Ishitani, 2006). Social stress is much more prevalent for the incoming student, adjusting not just to a new environment, but also experiencing first independence (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Even though social stress is not task related, it does affect academic self-efficacy, and minority students have compounded social stress by the duties of acculturation (Zajacova et al., 2005).

The diversity of non-white students entering college in the last thirty years is too complex to assign any complete understanding of their experience of stress and acculturation, but there
are some general commonalities. First, as a minority, they have all experienced racism in one form or another (Kearney et al., 2005). Most of them come from a family whose parents were not college educated. They are first generation and first to experience the work load of college in addition to their other obligations (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Consequently, they are not, as a group, wealthy, or capable of paying tuition rates, but more rely on financial aid (Purnell & Blank, 2004). They come from families that are not western or individualistic in their behavior patterns. Even multi-generational Americans, who are not white, come from a culture that has survived generations of white dominance by clinging to family collectivism over rugged individualism. With that collectivism, come obligations that most white students do not experience. They are motivated to go to college for a shared family accomplishment, not a private goal (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). They may be required to live at home, babysit, contribute to the family income, or save money, further reducing socialization (Jessica M. Dennis, Evelyn Calvillo, & Alfredo Gonzalez, 2008). Balancing all of those needs, family, work, and school, lead to a stress level that is evident in the disproportionate numbers of minority students who suffer from depression, anxiety, and health problems (Purnell & Blank, 2004).

If the main obstacles for minority college completion are non-academic, then the institution, in its own best interest, should provide services to help minorities with coping skills. A study of thirty, journaling, minority freshmen at California State University, revealed that seeking support was the most successful coping strategy; however, that support did not include helping agencies at the university (Phinney & Haas, 2003). “In Their Own Voices,” a narrative study of Latino college students, asked the participants to name ways in which colleges could help them. The answers centered on increasing the social community by admitting more Latino
students and hiring Latino faculty/staff. They also wanted more financial aid, work opportunities, and study skills training (Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004). They expressed simplistic solutions to their stress such as more social relationships, more money, and more opportunity, but they did not ask for counseling.

American colleges, western in philosophy, have long understood the need for counseling students who are suffering stress (Purnell & Blank, 2004). Even community colleges have some form of counseling service or referral, but what happens when the population that suffers the most stress, is also the least likely to seek help (Kearney et al., 2005)? Non-whites do not view themselves with a rugged individual philosophy; they believe in the value of community and collective help, so why would they not enjoy the free counseling services offered by their university community? Why is that route to coping particularly repugnant? ” The problem with western counseling is that the intent of therapy is an introspective search for a cause (Kearney et al., 2005).

This intrapsychic etiology model does not apply to clients who are less concerned with their individual development, and more focused on the development of their place within the community (Kearney et al., 2005). Blacks, Asians, and Latinos have a variety of reasons for not seeking formal counseling services. Black Americans have a long history of being institutionalized without fair assessment, and may be fearful or embittered over past outcomes, especially if they believe they have deeper problems. Asians attach weakness to helping services, and Latinos believe the family is most effective, since it is the family they want to buttress with their psychological health (Kearney et al., 2005). For the minorities who do utilize college counseling services, they also hold the highest rate for counseling attrition (Constantine, 2002).
This contributes to a perpetuation of the problem if ex-counseling clients are reporting back to peers that they found little relevance in their experience.

While multi-cultural training is imperative for counselors on today’s college campuses, that sensitivity does not significantly increase satisfaction ratings for minority students in counseling (Constantine, 2002). Matching counselors to clients with the same ethnicity lowered counseling attrition rates but did not change satisfaction levels (Kearney et al., 2005). The satisfaction ratings did not remarkably change, because multicultural competency and counselor disposition are interrelated (Constantine, 2002). A good counselor is naturally culturally sensitive, and students already willing to seek counseling may have been predisposed to a positive assessment. The multicultural competency of their counselor may be icing on the cake (Constantine, 2002). Short term models adhered to in college counseling centers may also have a positive effect on minority students who tend to be solution focused, and not as interested in causality (Kearney et al., 2005). But how do they get there?

Students who seek formal counseling services at universities, who are considering dropping out, have a better retention rate than those who expressed a desire to leave and did not seek counseling (Patton, 2006). Counseling is successful for intervention for minorities who utilize it, especially group work. It helps them to understand that others are struggling too, but requiring counseling of all students would be logistically impossible on most campuses (Gary, Kling, & Dodd, 2004). The help, for which minorities consistently express a greater need, is peer support (Dennis et al., 2005; Longerbeam et al., 2004; Patton, 2006; Phinney & Haas, 2003). In response, universities have created peer mentoring programs for advising, and leadership as well as learning communities. All of these programs claim to support retention, but none have provided clear evidence of their effect on minority students (Patton, 2006). These programs are
academic based because academics is the common thread that all college students are experiencing, but what they also have in common is stress.

The task for colleges and universities is to require students to think about stress management before it leads to depressed self-efficacy. Entering college, orientation programs are very successful at allaying fears of parents and acculturating students to their new reality, if the student is going to live on campus (Patton, 2006). However few colleges have figured out how to make orientation programs for off campus freshmen and for transfer students that create the same sense of community and peer support (Patton, 2006). The most vulnerable group to attrition, with the highest concentration of minorities, is still a mystery to college outreach programs. Colleges strive for programs that serve the majority, but among first year students, those who live off campus and transfers are the minority; therefore, orientation programs are not centered on their experience. It is unfortunate that colleges are limited in their programming, to those that serve the highest numbers, when it is the minority groups that most heavily affect the institutions attrition record (Jessica M. Dennis et al., 2008).

By the research, colleges would be wise to incorporate a form of group counseling for these students. Group work should be focused on the outside forces that create stress for college students and not on academics. Leaders of these groups could be upper class students, carefully chosen, and well trained in group facilitation over a summer long program. They might function similar to Resident Assistants, leading group meetings, and making themselves available for crisis. Most importantly, they have been through the same experience and did not drop out. Not only is this another opportunity for campus employment, a need expressed by Latino students, it can create a common peer experience, not by race or ethnicity but by students and families that make similar lifestyle decisions (Longerbeam et al., 2004). Creating a program for off campus
freshmen and first year transfers will work to corral a large number of at risk minorities who may need better coping strategies without further stigmatizing them by their ethnicity.

These groups should be developmental and strength based. Members focus on the experiences that helped them to arrive at college, and how to recognize their role in that success. This would boost, or recall self-efficacy, in times of stress. It is counseling, but because minorities often eschew counseling, and counseling still carries a stigmatization, it must have a unique and interesting name. The name is reflective of the group’s work, school pride, goal orientation and peer support. Many universities have created academic learning communities, or so called ‘villages,’ by many names; they are based on housing similar majors together. Incoming engineering students, in the same dormitory, have a common academic experience, and help each other. A similar program is needed to serve the student more likely to drop out, the minority male, living at home, and working while studying engineering. For him the constructed community must be about the business of stress relief by balancing outside pressures, and leaving him capable of surmounting the task of studying engineering. For his academic survival, he needs a group by any other name.
References


