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REVERSING THE TREND TOWARD FAILURE

REVIRTIENDO LA TENDENCIA AL FRACASO

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ABSTRACT

In order to solve a problem or reverse a trend, the researcher must first identify the problem, and then suggest solutions or resolutions for that problem so as to offer hope for the future. From all indications, African American students are lagging behind in college education. Of those who do come to college, a troubling percentage do not persevere to graduation. Among those most at risk for failure to succeed in college are African American males. On the average, Black males in America appear to be in deep trouble: For example, many more college aged Black men are in prison than are enrolled in higher education. A Justice Policy study in 2000 (Associated Press, March 28, 2006) reported that fewer African American men were in higher education (603,000) than were in prison and jail (791,600); and the rate continues to diverge (Schauer & Schauer, 2006 & 2007a). This debilitating trend must be reversed and one available alternative is to support those who choose education. Therefore, it would seem to make sense that once these young people are in college, every effort should be made to keep them there. By studying some of the correlates of Black male success, it is hoped that more African American men can be aided toward attaining college degrees and greater career mobility through interventions more accurately focused upon meeting their precise needs (Schauer & Schauer, 2007a).

KEYWORDS: Non-cognitive variables, Academic success, African American men, GPA, ACT, SAT, Graduation rates.

RESUMEN

Con el fin de resolver un problema o revertir una tendencia, el investigador debe primero identificar el problema y luego sugerir soluciones o resoluciones para ese problema con el fin de ofrecer esperanzas para el futuro. De todas las indicaciones, los estudiantes afroamericanos están quedando rezagados en la educación universitaria. De los que llegan a la Universidad, un porcentaje preocupante no perseverar a la graduación. Entre quienes más en riesgo por la falta de éxito en la Universidad están los hombres afroamericanos. En promedio, los varones negros en Estados Unidos parecen estar en serios problemas: por ejemplo, muchos más hombres negros de Universidad de edad están en la cárcel que están matriculados en la educación superior. Un estudio de política de la justicia en el año 2000 (Associated Press, 28 de marzo de 2006) informaron que menos hombres afro americanos estaban en la educación superior (603.000) que estaban en prisión y cárcel (791.600); y la tasa sigue divergen (Schauer & Schauer, 2006 & 2007a). Debe revertirse esta tendencia debilitante y es una alternativa disponible para apoyar a quienes optan por educación. Por lo tanto, parece tener sentido que una vez que estos jóvenes están en la Universidad, deben hacerse todos los esfuerzos para mantenerlos allí. Mediante el estudio de algunos de los correlatos de éxito macho negro, se espera que más hombres afro americanos pueden ser ayudados hacia alcanzar títulos universitarios y una mayor movilidad de carrera a través de intervenciones más exactamente enfocado a satisfacer sus necesidades precisas (Schauer & Schauer, 2007a).

PALABRAS CLAVE: Variables no cognitivas, Éxito académico, Hombres afro-americanos, GPA, ACT, SAT, Índices de graduados.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The identified task of institutions of higher education is to recruit, retain and graduate students who meet their requirements. The constant issue for college recruitment and admissions personnel is to select and admit students who will be successful. The selection tools of choice for many years have been the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) exam. Research cited by Fleming (2002) indicates that the correlation between SAT and college Grade Point Average (GPA) is consistent among most students. Additionally, she suggests that the only other measure which effectively predicts college success is high school GPA. On the other hand, she agrees with others that SAT scores seem to correlate with socio-economic status. This article is an examination of a number of variables identified by the scientific literature as predictors of college success for Black males. The intent of the study is to encourage university scholars, researchers, advisors, and students to plan research and programming toward increasing the college success rates of African American males (Schauer & Schauer, 2006).

Predicting the academic success of minority, female, non-traditional, and first generation students, as well as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, is not only

difficult but is influenced by a number of factors. Among the issues which confound predictions of the success of African American students appears to be the type of college attended – whether a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or a predominantly White institution. Additionally, the amount of student involvement in campus activities, the quality of services offered to students, and living situations while attending college (Stretch, 2005, 2-3) impact academic success. Perhaps the time has come to look at factors other than High School GPAs and standardized test scores when considering college applications. William Sedlacek and others have suggested that the use of noncognitive variables is a more effective means of predicting college success.

THE STUDY

For over 30 years, William Sedlacek has studied and researched the noncognitive indicators of academic success. His book *Beyond the Big Tests* (2004) proposes that the SAT and ACT are inadequate for predicting which students should be admitted to our institutions of higher learning. The standardized tests glean information which is useful for some students; but they are not helpful at predicting academic success for women, minorities, “or anyone who has not had a White, middleclass, Eurocentric, heterosexual, male experience” (Sedlacek, 2004, 6) in the American educational system. Stretch (2005) goes a step further, suggesting that, the big tests do a poor job of predicting the academic successes of African American females, and they are even “less useful in predicting performance for African American Males” (Sample & Seymour, 1971; Arbona & Novy, 1990). Sedlacek's Non-Cognitive Questionnaire (NCQ), on the other hand, has been used, tested, validated, examined, debated, and used again by many institutions of higher education in the prediction of the college success of African American students, both men and women. *Non-cognitive is used here to refer to variables relating to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions, rather than relying solely on the traditional verbal and quantitative (often called cognitive) areas typically measured by standardized tests* (Sedlacek, 2004, 7).

As early as 1976, Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) proposed eight noncognitive variables which would enhance predictions of college success and failure for minorities and nontraditional students. Their suggestion was that the degree to which students adjust to these areas, and the degree to which the institutions foster this adjustment, will help determine academic success. These noncognitive variables are useful as standards for admission; as evaluation instruments for anticipating successful GPAs, persistence in college, and graduation; and as advising intervention tools. The eight variables are: Positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, successful handling of the system, preference for long-range over short term goals, availability of a strong support person, successful leadership experience, demonstrated community involvement, and knowledge acquired in a field.

DESCRIPTION OF NONCOGNITIVE VARIABLES

The following description of the eight noncognitive variables, as defined by Sedlacek and his co-researchers, explain Sedlacek's thoughts and are the building-blocks of his Non-Cognitive Questionnaire. These variables are neither solid nor discrete and the

researcher must keep this in mind. Variable conceptualizations do overlap and different researchers use varying terms for these concepts.

Positive self-concept or confidence: Embracing a positive self-concept means that a person can speak, write, and think positively about him or herself; that he or she has strength of character. The confident student expects to graduate, expects to do well in the academic setting, and is not afraid to face new challenges. It stands to reason that anyone who enters college feeling confident that he or she can succeed is more likely to survive and thrive on campus. Rosenberg's "adolescent self-image" (1965) and Bandura's "self-efficacy" (1997), both of which are related to academic as well as life-success, are constructs which fit closely with a positive self-concept (Wood & Locke, 1987; and Okech & Harrington, 2002).

Realistic self-appraisal: In order to thrive in college or in life, one must be able to endure constructive criticism as well as praise. The college student must be strong enough to accept the consequences that follow a poor performance and make a realistic self-appraisal. Self-development and the mindset of broadening oneself during the academic career is essential. The student who practices assessing personal strengths and weaknesses, who seeks help for perceived deficits, and who wants to know how he or she is doing in class before grades come out in order to correct any problems, is generally the one with the top grades.

Another aspect of this realistic self-appraisal is adaptability (Shivpuri, Schmitt, Oswald, & Kim, 2006). The student, who is equipped with effective coping mechanisms, will be able to deal successfully with change, new situations and the multiple demands of college--especially during the critical first year. Finally, Rogers (1984) shows that resistance to becoming easily discouraged, and expecting to be challenged in college, are strong predictors of Black male success (Stretch).

Successfully Negotiating the System: One of Sedlacek's original variables was labeled "dealing with racism"; but in recent years, he has revised it to read "successfully handling or negotiating the system" (2004). This seems evident in light of the fact that for women, and students with disabilities, racism may or may not come into play.

Milliones' (1980) Black consciousness measure refers to an individual's beliefs or attitudes about self and/or race. He identified four stages of Black consciousness as preconscious or antagonistic, confrontational or emotional, internalization or incorporation, and integration or tolerance. Building upon Milliones, Sedlacek (2004) suggests that the successful African American student, who is a realist, has experienced discrimination and is dedicated to improving the system in which he or she finds him or herself. Learning to handle circumstances and situations in a rational and tolerant manner leads to developing new abilities.

Another way of negotiating the system, as explained by Shivpuri et al. (2006), is by becoming a student who is continuously learning, actively seeking new information and skills, and open to new experiences. These attributes will help the student become more successful academically. In the same vein, Hood (1992) found "racial homogeneity" to be the fourth strongest non-cognitive predictor of black male academic success in a predominantly White institution. Racial homogeneity, as Hood uses the term, appears to be synonymous with Sedlacek's variable of negotiating the system and dealing with racism.

Prefers Long-Range Goals to Short-Term or Immediate Needs:

Learning the art of goal setting is a necessity for college students, but top students know how to state specific, concrete goals which are oriented in the future. Examples of preferring long-term over short-term goals are being willing and ready to work hard for good grades; understanding the relationship between present education and future goals; and being willing to defer gratification.

Hood (1992) cites long-range goal setting as the third strongest predictor of Black male academic success in a predominately White college setting. Heckman & Rubenstein (2001) begin their research paper by citing the importance of a student's motivation and persistence to succeed in college or in life. Persistence (or perseverance) attaches to the preference for long range goals and indicates a commitment to one's goals despite obstacles. Perseverance includes the motivation to finish projects and meet deadlines. Shivpuri et al. (2006) concluded that perseverance is especially related to higher GPA in the first year of college.

Availability of Strong Support Person: A recurring theme in the retention literature is that the availability of dedicated mentors leads toward student success. (Schauer, Schauer, & Rabb, 2006). Some studies include the presence of a strong support person under the theme of social capital (Schauer, 2005). The student who has even one strong support person behind him or her is far more likely to make a rapid and appropriate adjustment to college (Sedlacek, 1989).

Successful Leadership Experience: "Success breeds success" could be a subtitle for this variable. The student who has had successful experiences in leadership roles is more likely to excel in college. Along with leadership opportunities, the student develops organizational ability, learns how to influence and direct others, and practices mediation techniques. This student is comfortable taking action when called upon to do so.

Hood (1992) found that leadership was the strongest noncognitive predictor of Black male academic success in a predominantly White institutional setting. In his discussion of leadership experience for Black Males, Hood included participation in sports teams and clubs. Rogers' (1984) study suggests that pride in the accomplishments of leadership was the strongest noncognitive predictor for Black Males.

Demonstrated Community Involvement: Community service or community involvement is necessary for navigating the college campus. Living in a residence hall, participating in class, and forming study groups are all the outgrowth of past experience in community. The student who has contributed to his/her community has shown an interest in and understanding of the community she/he just left. Understanding and accepting one's background and being willing to work toward the benefit of the community evidences a level of maturity that is necessary for one who is leaving home and striking out on his/her own. Shivpuri et.al. (2006) also list good interpersonal skills as a factor leading to academic success. Interpersonal skills work toward building and maintaining community; conforming to new social dynamics, having good communication skills, and satisfying peer relations are all important to the success of every college student.

Knowledge Acquired in a Field: This variable is usually understood in the traditional sense of acquiring knowledge, but Sedlacek allows for the nontraditional acquisition of knowledge as well. Nontraditional methods of obtaining knowledge are

seen as those which are unusual or sub-culturally based methods of obtaining information and communicating knowledge. One example in some minority cultures is the opportunity for public debate. This out-of-classroom experience could easily translate to better class participation and discussion. Another example that may be noticed is the quick learning of acting skills by African American students. It appears that, on average, these young people are more easily taught to act than their Euro-American counterparts. This ability in acting and expression may translate into college success in other areas.

Persons of color are more apt to learn and develop by way of methods that are less traditional and outside the education system. The methods may be related to culture or gender, and the field itself may be nontraditional (Sedlacek, 2004, 48).

Sherman, Giles, & Williams-Green (1994) point out that students of all ethnic backgrounds, who have solid records of prior achievement, are likely to continue that achievement in college; and that the key factor of continued academic achievement is the extent to which skills acquired in high school can be transferred to college studies. Sherman, et Al. suggests that this is especially important for black students.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the fall of 2000, the Non-Cognitive Questionnaire was administered to 127 African American college freshmen at a small, Southern, Historically Black University. Of these students, 42 were females and 85 were males. Each of them filled out the NCQ as part of the application process for residence hall placement (Schauer & Schauer, 2007b). This study was set up to examine the predictive efficiency of the student scores on the NCQ, of their scores on either the SAT or ACT standardized tests, and of their high school grade point averages (HSGPA). SAT scores were converted to their ACT equivalents for the purpose of creating one variable representing student scores upon standardized tests. When students had both SAT and ACT scores listed, the higher score was chosen for the purposes of this study (Schauer & Schauer, 2007b). All of these students had either graduated or had left the university by the fall of 2007 (Schauer & Schauer, 2007b).

Data for four success variables were available for this research: (1) Whether the student had graduated or not, (2) the students' final, cumulative grade point averages, (3) the percentage of all class credit hours attempted which were successfully completed, and (4) the number of semesters of college through which the students had persisted in pursuit of their educations (Schauer & Schauer, 2007b).

The independent variables displaying the strongest correlation with (1) *Successful Graduation* were the noncognitive variable "Knowledge Acquired in a Field" (Pearson Correlation of .287) and the HSGPA (.286 corr.). The preliminary SAT/ACT scores are much more weakly correlated (.171) with successful graduation.

The HSGPA is the predictor having the closest correlation (.291) with final (2) *College GPA*. The additive score calculated from the totals of the eight Sedlacek non-cognitive variables is second with a correlation of .278. Sedlacek variables "Realistic Self-appraisal," "Successfully Negotiating the System," and "Prefers Long-range Goals" each have coefficients at or above .240 when independently correlated with

final college GPA. SAT/ACT displays a weaker relationship to the final college GPA with a correlation coefficient of only .230.

The additive score of the Sedlacek noncognitive variables has the strongest relationship to the student's (3) *Hours Successfully Completed* (.298). High school GPA shows a weak correlation at .166; and with this sample of university students, the SAT/ACT scores appear to be totally unrelated to the ratio of class hours successfully completed (Pearson Correlation of only .031).

The only strong correlation shown for the persistence variable, (4) the *Number of Semesters Completed*, appears to be with HSGPA (.246). None of the non-cognitive scores appear to show a strong relationship, and the SAT/ACT scores show only a .179 correlation coefficient with number of semesters completed.

The Sedlacek noncognitive variables, when calculated as suggested by their creator, show promise in predicting successful college graduation for African American students, for predicting their final college GPAs, and in predicting the ratio of successful hours of coursework completed. The standardized test scores (SAT and ACT) appear to be extremely weakly predictive of college success for African American freshmen at a Historically Black University. The variable which appears to show the most promise in predicting college success for African American freshmen is high school grade point average. Strong correlations are shown between high school GPA and three of the four success variables. (Schauer & Schauer, 2007b).

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