Profiling At-Risk College Students: Basis for Intervention

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Abstract

The retention rate in Mountain Province State Polytechnic College-Tadian Campus within the past five years is low at 66% while the graduation rate is even lower at 47%. Obviously, these are not encouraging figures but before one can suggest solutions to improve this existing condition, one has to determine the factors causing the prevalence of at-risk students or students likely not to pursue or finish their studies. The following problems were answered in this study: What percentage of students currently enrolled in campus are considered to be at-risk? What are the likely factors that put these students at-risk? What actions may be done to provide support to the students in minimizing or preventing the possibility of their dropping out at the same time raising the retention and graduation rate in the campus? Quantitatively, a descriptive survey using questionnaire, interview, and background investigation on all the currently enrolled students was employed. Eighty-nine point eighty-six (89.86) per cent of the total respondents from the said campus consider themselves at-risk and have a great chance of not finishing their studies due learning challenges caused by insufficient pre-college preparation or slow learning capacity, problematic family situation, unsupportive or discouraging faculty and staff, unpleasant or hostile school environment, and off-campus distractions such as vices and other diversions. Qualitatively through in-depth interviews, majority of the informants recognize the need for counselling, restructuring of school policies, tutoring, and community involvement in order for them to survive college.

Keywords: At-Risk Students, Philippines, Counselling, Surviving College

Introduction

The excited buzz about Mountain Province State Polytechnic College soon to become a university gives an outward impression that the college is indeed doing an excellent job in terms of providing quality education to the local learners and molding them into valuable members of the society making the institution's contribution to global progress to be supposedly very evident.

But looking closely and probing into the fine prints in the credentials of the institution, there is this flaw in the documents that may not be readily noticeable but impossible to ignore.

Figures on the Retention and Graduation rates particularly in MPSPC Tadian Campus are pointing down south not to mention the equally dismal board performances of the graduates. From that alone, the institution may not be doing well after all, that is, even without using any other yardstick for valuation purposes.

In the middle of this incongruity are the students seriously struggling to finish their courses.

Without the needed external support to these students from either the school, community and their families; they are bound to fail. These are the At-Risk students.

Literature Review

The term 'at-risk' was coined after an article *A Nation at Risk* which was published by National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983. The article depicted both the economic and social set-up in the United States as endangered due to the failing educational system (Placier, 1993) which is primarily manifested through the learners who fail to complete their courses due to various reasons.

Students who are considered as "at-risk" are the ones who face tough situations that other students do not experience.

According to the study of Smerdon (2002) for the American Institutes for Research, students under the low socioeconomic status manifest isolation and separation in school particularly the male students.

So, what can be the contributing factors in becoming at-risk?

Poverty in the family or within the community is one. Students who come from poor families or communities such as informal settlements are more likely to be branded as at-risk (Knight, Shakeshaft, et.al., 2017).

Impoverished settings can create several risk factors for the young people making them ever more susceptible to risk-behaviors and adversely affect their future as they mature. Growing up in poverty is linked with several risk factors, including being influenced with anti-social behaviors, violent neighborhoods and psychological imbalance (Ridings, 2010).

These poverty-related factors are shown to have damaging connections with educational performance and negative behaviors towards schooling (Obsuth, Watson, & Moretti, 2010).

Young people belonging to families who are struggling economically are those that are most at-risk. (Koball, Heather, et al. 2011).

An unstable family set-up or dysfunctional family can also put a child in a precarious situation as far as education is concerned.

A child who is raised in a stable two-parent home has a better nutrition, school performance, and social skills manifested by positive dealings with peers. Studies show that upsetting the ideal family structure caused by separation of parents, co-habitation, or remarriage have strong harmful effects on multiple adjustments and academic progress. Children who are exposed to domestic violence, criminal activity, or substance abuse have a much higher chance of long-term behavioral problems, such as alcoholism and drug abuse and mental health problems (Koball, Heather, et al. 2011).

The school, which is supposed to be the place where youth will build their dreams can also turn out to be the destroyer of one's tomorrow by leaving them without functional academic readiness. School environments can become trenches for many learners since bullying, peer-pressure or hostile school environment can easily undermine students who cannot cope or do not have social support (Koball, Heather, et al. 2011).

High poverty neighborhoods are often characterized by high crime rates, limited resources, and underperforming schools. Schools with fewer resources are more likely to be associated with poor academic outcomes. Fewer resources mean higher student-to-teacher ratios, lower spending per student, and lower overall academic performance. These neighborhoods often lack the resources needed to help youth overcome risk factors.

Despite their apparent advantages in various aspects, youth from affluent and well-educated families can also be at-risk. These "rich kids" experience elevated rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and overall unhappiness, as highlighted by Levine (2006). It is essential to recognize that this concern should not diminish the society's attention to other vulnerable groups.

Concept Development

Data from the registrar's office of the Tadian Campus of Mountain Province State Polytechnic College indicates that out of more than a thousand students who enroll per semester, an average of 67 per cent across the three departments finish the semester. Under this retention rate, more than 290 students drop out within the semester. Of the 352 first batch of senior high school graduates who enrolled in the campus during the first semester of SY 2018-2019, only 38 students or 10% of these enrollees graduated within the prescribed period of four years.

Where did the rest go? Twelve per cent (12%) transferred out, seventeen per cent (17%) are continuing their courses while the sixty-one per cent (61%) or a staggering 214 students dropped out of college.

Further enquiry has led to the information that these dropouts have varying reasons. From among the 25 dropouts tracked, the following prevailing reasons came out as their recurring answers: They cannot cope with the academic demands, lack of financial support despite the free tuition fee, got into a relationship and having a child, and neglected the school responsibilities due to frequent night life and drinking or other distractions such as computer

games and other priorities such as accepting jobs in pocket mining or construction and health reasons.

Research by Knight et al. (2017) highlights various systems designed to support at-risk students. Effective interventions should enhance risk behaviors, academic performance, sociability, sexual behavior, and psychological well-being. De Vries et al. (2015) emphasize that these interventions serve as anticipatory measures to prevent risk behaviors among learners.

Donnelly (1987) underscores the importance of early identification of at-risk students. Timely remediation measures, such as tutoring, counseling, awareness programs, multilingual instructions, employment training, truancy follow-up, and mentoring, can have a positive impact.

Notwithstanding the challenging outlook for at-risk students, psychologists are optimistic that many of these concerned young individuals can adapt to the academic environment even amidst their precarious circumstances. With concerted external support, these students' capacity to endure hardships and emerge stronger from them plays a crucial role in developing resilience—their ability to face life's inevitable challenges.

But if left ignored and unchecked, retention and graduation rates in MPSPC Tadian Campus will remain in the red despite the institution's laudable efforts in levelling up to establish a reputable name in the field of higher education. To keep this in check, thorough inspection of the factors that put vulnerable students to be at-risk should be done and strategizing for future actions should be arranged to finally put a plug or minimize this dropout floodgate; thus, this study.

Research Problems

To determine the factors that put the students at-risk and identifying these students in order for the school authorities to devise courses of action in response to this issue, this study aims to find answers the following problems: 1. What percentage of students currently enrolled in MPSPC-Tadian is considered to be at-risk across different categories? 2. What are the factors contributory to putting the students of MPSPC-Tadian at-risk? And, 3. What actions may be employed to provide necessary support to the at-risk students to minimize or prevent their possibility of dropping out at the same time raising the retention and graduation rate in the campus?

Methodology

This study was conducted at the Tadian Campus of Mountain Province State Polytechnic College where there was an observed prevalence of significant drop-outs from among the students.

Every student in the campus enrolled during the first semester of 2023 was asked to answer the validated questionnaire using codes instead of names to identify each respondent.

Using mixed method of research, the quantitative aspect counted and categorized the concerned students according to how they are classified and qualified as at-risk. For the quantitative aspect in the form of a modified grounded theory, an in-depth information gathering through follow-

up interview with each respondent was done. This allowed the researcher to profoundly understand how to recommend an appropriate action for each case.

Under the quantitative part of the study, descriptive statistics was used to determine the size of at-risk students in the campus and categorized them according to the factors that led them into such situation.

The rest of the study employed modified grounded theory analysis wherein the cited theories in the above review of related studies and literatures were connected with the situation of the identified subjects. After such analysis, coding was then applied to determine the factors that are causing the cases. Coding is categorization of data wherein a code will represent a theme or an idea.

Three types of coding were used in this study: Open coding was used initially to create meaning to the gathered data by organizing them first; Axial coding was used to connect the codes and determined the relationship of each case under the same category; and Selective coding was used to connect the categories according to how they were presented, understood and coded previously.

Result and Discussion

All 1,170 students enrolled in MPSPC Tadian Campus in 2023 were given the validated questionnaire to answer. Retrieval rate of the questionnaire is 80.94 per cent which means that 947 students returned the questionnaire. From the 947 respondents whose answers were retrieved, 851 or 89.86 per cent considered themselves to be at-risk. The 851 respondents were therefore considered the informants in this study after they positively answered to the question: *Was there ever an instance when you thought of quitting school?*

Asked how often do they think of quitting school, 19 per cent answered *always*, 17.97 per cent said *a lot of times*, 13.63 per cent said *sometimes*, 33 per cent said *few times* while 15.62 per cent said *very few times*. This question was asked to determine where the group of respondents are actually positioned. With the bulk of the respondents thinking of quitting school few times, while there are more students who are *always* thinking of quitting school than those who think of it *very few times*, this indicates that indeed the scenario should raise concerns.

The qualified respondents were also asked if they feel anxious or uneasy when they think of school. The purpose of this question is to determine if the school is contributory to their difficulties before looking at other factors. 52.76 per cent or majority of the qualified respondents positively answered while remaining 47.23 per cent have other sources of their predicaments affecting their studies which may not directly involve the school itself.

According to the respondents, the following are the possible factors that are triggering or causing them to think of quitting school.

Academic difficulty is the number one factor listed by the respondents. It is either they are not fully prepared or do not have the basic competencies needed for college or, as others simply put it, they are *not that bright enough to get through college*. The school does not have an admission policy that selects academically qualified enrollees. Everyone is allowed to enroll as they have documents to prove that they have finished high school or that they are allowed by the Department of Education through the Alternative Learning System (ALS) certification.

The second factor is poverty which, despite free tuition and the relatively low cost of living in the area, the respondents find it difficult to financially support themselves even with the most basic living expenses and occasional requirements in school such as for projects and even down to the daily transportation expenses to and from school.

Problematic family situation comes third. A considerable number of the respondents belong to a non-traditional family set-up. It is either one of the parents is missing and has another family or some of them are living with relatives. Some students were not aware of the at-risk implication of this situation until the conduct of this study. Most of the respondents do not receive any financial or even moral support from their own homes as many expressed that their own families do not believe that they may even finish their studies and that they are just using school to avoid getting a job.

In relation to this, the fourth factor is job related in connection to financial difficulties. Some respondents sacrifice school and accept jobs where they can be paid for the day. Hauling timber or sand, helping in house construction and occasional pocket mining are the most common activities the male respondents are engaged in. All of the respondents who selected this item are males. While it is commendable that students should seek for jobs to support themselves to college, others are enticed with the feeling of having instant money so they almost always prefer accepting daily paying jobs than going to school.

The next two items involve the school personnel and its environment. According to the respondents, it is their teachers or the school staff who are causing them to lose interest in their studies. Many of the respondents who were asked about this issue claim that they do not fully understand the lessons the teachers give them, others claim that the instructors are not teaching at all because they only provide the information about the lessons but do not bother to explain them properly. Others claim that in one semester, some teachers will only meet them less than five times. All these, the respondents say, are discouraging them to continue their schooling because eventually, they lose interest upon realizing that they are not being taught properly. The students further confirm that they do not feel the presence of a support system where they are given the opportunity to voice their concerns regarding their teachers without fear of being reprimanded by the teachers being complained about. They also claim that even teachers' evaluations are not effective in improving the teachers' performances because the teachers threaten them if the students give them low ratings.

As for the school environment which the students consider as unpleasant or inappropriate, laboratories and laboratory equipment are their primary concern. Most of the college students asked professed not to having seen any science laboratory in the campus, not even a microscope. Poorly ventilated classrooms, unsanitary rest rooms, and even absence sports facilities or gymnasium are the other concerns of the respondents. On top of that, other students complain of very few student organizations and activities where they can be part of to serve as support groups to them.

Like all other college students in such particular age, extra-curricular activities are essential in their social and mental development. Without such, they engage in other activities outside the campus which usually involves alcohol and other vices. Being hooked in such activities is disastrous to one's studies.

Research indicates that students involved in extra-curricular tend to achieve higher academic performance as compared to others who do focus only on academic concerns.

According to an article by Llego (2022) in Teacherph, participating in extracurricular activities have several advantages for learners. These activities allow students to acquire fresh skills, widen their social circle, and engage in new interests. Additionally, engaging in extracurriculars fosters leadership abilities and bolsters self-confidence.

For some students both male and female, they get into romantic relationship with their classmates or board mates. This often results in pregnancies which is a major obstacle in finishing one's studies. During students' orientations every beginning of the semester, a minimum amount of time is being allotted for topics such as teenage pregnancy, alcoholism and other common social problems that usually affect the students. Data from the Student Services and Development Office shows a consistent number of female students getting pregnant in semestral basis.

The least of the factors that cause students to discontinue their students is their personal choice not to pursue studies. No other reasons given except that they just do not feel like continuing their studies.

Conclusion

Mountain Province State Polytechnic College is a rural college that mostly caters to local students mostly who cannot afford to go to big universities in the cities.

One explanation why most of these students are considered at risk and they find the academic endeavor challenging because most of them have not passed the admission tests administered in other universities and colleges while MPSPC has practically an open admission policy.

At-risk students are struggling to build their future through education. It is the moral obligation of the school, the society and most importantly their families to help them through by first understanding them and offering them ways to ease lighten their burdens.

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