

The Effect of Traditional and Non-Traditional Academic Models
on
High School Graduation Rates

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	i
Abstract	ii
I. Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Statement of Research Hypothesis	2
Operational Definitions	2
II. Literature Review	4
Definition of the Problem	4
Description of the Extent of the Problem	5
Causes and Effects of Disconnected Youth	6
Prevention and Intervention Strategies	10
III. Methods	15
Design	15
Participants	15
Instrument	16
Procedure	16
IV. Results	18
V. Discussion	19
References	

List of Tables

1. Traditional and Non-Traditional Students and Graduation Requirement Status	18
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine whether a traditional school academic model and a non-traditional academic model are equally effective in leading students in a low income, urban high school to meet graduation requirements. The study used a causal-comparative design with a convenience sample to compare graduation rates of seniors who followed a traditional academic model and those who followed a non-traditional academic model. A chi-square test was used to compare the proportion of traditional and non-traditional students that met graduation requirements. The null hypothesis indicated that in a year in which some seniors participated in a traditional academic model and other seniors participated in a non-traditional academic model, there would be no significant difference in the proportion of students that graduated. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected. Research revealed that both traditional and non-traditional academic models provide a notable means of success for students.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Across the nation, school systems are faced with the issue of high school dropouts. Studies suggest that on average, 72% of students graduate from high school (American Youth Policy Forum, 2011). The Maryland State Department of Education (2014) reports a slightly higher-than-average graduation rate at just over 84% for four-year cohort students who entered school in 2009. Youth in urban, low income areas are among those particularly at risk for not graduating.

Dropout indicators such as academic failure, a disinterest in school, problematic behavior, and dealing with life events are four major reasons typically associated with this demographic (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). When a student fails a course, it may lead to retention and eventual incompleteness of required graduation credits. Course failure may also indicate a student's disinterest in school. A lack of interest due to a disconnect with coursework and classmates often leads to an increase in absenteeism and a decrease in motivation to return to school. Behavioral issues, in and out of school, typically lead to suspensions and possible expulsion if the student's unproductive behavior gets in the way of his or her own educational progress. Lastly, familial responsibilities and/or issues (i.e. taking care of younger siblings, children, or family members; gaining employment to support the family) weigh heavily on the students if these responsibilities interfere with their academic schedules.

The action research was conducted in a traditional high school located in a low-income urban area in the mid-Atlantic region. The researcher is a teacher in the high school in which the

study was conducted. The researcher took particular note of what appeared to be the increased number of students ineligible for graduation due to the aforementioned risk factors. As a result, the school implemented non-traditional means to help improve upon the overall graduation and success rate of its students. Online course availability provided a non-traditional means for those students seeking to complete high school without having to participate in a traditional school setting. The population serviced by the school found that many students were opting to “attend” class in a non-traditional classroom in order to obtain high school credits. This approach provided convenience, solitude, and independence for those students faced with at-risk factors that would have otherwise prevented them from completing high school. However, the current school administration is shifting towards eliminating non-traditional methods to adjust the academic school setting and culture.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be studied is whether a traditional school academic model and a non-traditional academic model are equally effective in leading students in a low income, urban high school to meet graduation requirements.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that in a year in which some seniors participate in a traditional academic model and other seniors participate in a non-traditional academic model, there is no significant difference in the proportion of students that graduate.

Operational Definition

The terms **over-aged** and **under-credited** connote those students, or **seniors** who have re-engaged or re-enrolled in high school who neglected to earn the state required credits to graduate

within the allotted 4-year cohort as originally anticipated upon their initial enrollment in high school. This can include students in their fifth or sixth years of high school. **Senior(s)** is defined as a student that has been enrolled for four or more years in high school that had plans for graduating in the 2012-2013 school year.

A **traditional academic model** is defined as teacher-led, classroom-based instruction. Students who participated in a traditional academic model were considered traditional students if all of their coursework was provided via the traditional model. **Non-traditional academic program** is defined as one designed to meet the specific needs of over-aged and under-credited students between 13-17 years of age. A student was considered as being a non-traditional student if he or she had at least one non-traditional course. **Meeting graduation requirements** refers to meeting all of the state graduation requirements including earning at least 21 overall credits with a specified number of credits for particular subject areas, passing state standardized testing requirements, and completing at least 75 hours of community service.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Definition of the Problem

Several state and national lawmakers ponder ways to increase the global position of the education system in the United States. At one point, the United States could boast about its academic positioning amongst some of the world's most competitive arenas. As it currently stands, the United States is ranked 20th out of 28 industrialized nations, well behind such world contenders as Finland and North Korea when it comes to preparing the free world's children for competition (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

Within the past 25 years, stifled economic growth has contributed to an increasingly growing problem: high school dropouts (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Education is losing an increasingly higher number of students opting to drop out for several costly reasons. It is estimated that annually, the United States loses \$300 billion in lost wages due to the dropout crisis. Additionally, the drop out issue is damaging the nation's economic competitiveness. It is important to identify who the individuals are who are dropping out and to determine what can be done to improve upon the education system.

Drop outs or disconnected youth can be defined as any students who are "over-aged and under-credited for high school graduation, and who have insufficient academic skill levels to complete credits necessary for graduation." (Tsoi-A-Fatt, Harris, Thakur, & Larsen, 2007, p. 2). Disconnected youth are finding themselves lost in the education world and unable to efficiently sustain themselves amidst an ever changing economic system. As a nation, the focus should be to maintain and/or re-engage these students in order for them to be successful academically,

economically, and socially. Under the No Child Left Behind legislation, the School Dropout Prevention Act allowed for the funding for effective interventions that met the academic needs of disconnected and at-risk youth. Although appealing on paper, the SDPA did not address the specific needs of the at-risk/disconnected youth nor the infrastructure serving them (Harris et al., 2007).

Extent of the Problem

High School Dropout Rates

It is estimated that across the nation, at least one in five students drops out of school with a total of 800,000 students dropping out every school year (Harris & Princiotta, 2009). With such a disproportionate number of students leaving high school, the focus must be on retaining students by finding who they are and how to reach them. Students do not make a conscious decision to lag behind in school. The status of over-aged and under-credited did not happen to these students overnight. Oftentimes, early signs of falling behind began to show during their early elementary or middle school years. Many times this is because they encounter difficult life events. Other times, it is out of disinterest in school.

Demographics

The image of a drop out student does not fit into any one clear cut picture. Students from all backgrounds suit the face of the drop out student. Unfortunately, the student whose image is most likely to be seen is that of a minority student from a low-income family with a low family literacy level. Students who come from such a household have a greater chance of failing academically than their counterparts. In 2003, it was estimated that only 55 per cent of African-Americans and 53 percent of Hispanics graduated from high school in comparison to 78 per cent of white students (Tsoi-A-Fatt et al., 2007).

Incarcerated Youth

A high percentage of youth who have been engaged in the juvenile justice system are likely to be a part of the dropout culture. When enough time has been spent detained in a correctional facility, those youth miss much needed instructional time and, therefore, fall further behind if and when they decide to return to school (Tsoi-A-Fatt et al., 2007). Once the decision has been made to drop out, some students turn to criminal activities which, again, - leads to incarceration. Statistics show that 75 percent of all state prison inmates and 59 percent of federal prison inmates are high school drop outs.

Causes and Effects of Disconnected Youth

'ABC's' of Disengagement

There are several factors that can create the development of a disconnected youth. Researchers have narrowed the individual factors into overarching categories – or ABC's. High absenteeism, behavior problems, and course failure are the strongest predictors of a student's lack of success (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). The three early warning signals indicate signs of a student's likelihood of dropping out of school.

Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism – as it spans middle and high school - can be identified when a student is present for less than 80 percent of the time. Lost instructional time averages to missing more than two days of school per month (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009).

Behavior Problems

In some middle schools, students are given a behavior grade that may range from ‘excellent’ to ‘unsatisfactory’. An unsatisfactory grade or suspension may allude to other warning signs. When students misbehave in ways that interfere with their academic progress, suspension or expulsion is likely (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). This type of intervention only subjects the students to even more lost time in the classroom which in turn leaves them even further behind the rest of their peers.

Course/Credit Failure

Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) point out that ninth grade failure does not occur in a vacuum. Research indicates that ninth grade is a critical year in understanding drop out trends with high suspension levels accompanied by even higher failing reading/language arts and math grades. Ninth grade failure tends to materialize in relation to prior patterns of failure visible in early grades. Longitudinal studies have shown that 50 percent of students with early failure in mathematics and English eventually drop out of school.

Institutional Factors

The term, “dropout factory,” is defined as a school in which less than 60 percent of its 9th grade population reaches the 12th grade in three years (Harris & Princiotta, 2009). All states encounter high dropout rates. There is not one state that carries a high school graduation rate higher than 88 percent (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). A high concentration of these drop out factories tend to be in high minority, high-poverty urban areas. Reportedly, 26 states have 20 or more of these schools; five states have more than 100 (Harris & Princiotta, 2009). Unfortunately, many of the students who attend a drop out factory school function well-below grade level academically and are already poised for dropping out.

Educational Setting

Drop out factories are a breeding ground for drop outs. Students attending these schools are often met with traditional, ineffective curricula that do not suit their educational needs nor address current, relevant societal issues. Tsoi-A-Fatt et al (2007) found that 30-50 percent of disconnected youth are not thriving in traditional high school environments. Educational supports that are put in place fail to reach the varying academic needs of the students, their learning styles, lack of motivation, issues of poor school climate, and stressed home environments. Multiple pathways, Tsoi-A-Fatt et al indicated, should teach them marketable skills which in turn lead to a high school credential. Flexible options will allow for an appropriate means for educational attainment.

Student disengagement can also be related to the organization of the school. Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) conducted a study in Chicago schools that determined students' success can be attributed to the relationship with their teachers, the relevance of classroom instruction, and the working dynamic of the teachers within the school as a whole.

Income Disparity

Reports have shown that those who earn a high school diploma stand the chance of earning more in their lifetimes than those who do not, which is still about \$1 million less than a college graduate (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Most jobs that are currently being offered require a minimum of a high school diploma or its equivalent. The consequences of graduating with a high school diploma affect not just the individual student, but can have an overall effect on the community and nation as a whole. An additional consideration is the ever-changing face of globalization that continues to increase as many low-skilled jobs cease to exist. It was estimated

that more than 17 percent of high school drop outs were unemployed. If dropouts are fortunate enough to become employed, they stand to earn, on average, \$7,000 less per year than a high school graduate and \$26,000 less than a college graduate.

Cost on the Community

Preparing students for the world in order to become productive citizens in society is a hope for all. For dropouts, understanding the likelihood of being able to sustain one's self while lacking a certificate of some kind is a challenge. Due to employment requirements, some students may turn (or return) to criminal activity, becoming even more of a burden upon society. Reports reviewed by Princiotta and Reyna (2009) point out that dropouts are far more likely than high school graduates to participate in criminal activity. States report that they are able to save between \$1.6 million to \$752 million in avoidable criminal-related activity if students remain in school. Not only are dropouts tampering with their own livelihood but their lack of skill and knowledge diminishes the community around them. States reportedly bear the costs of dropouts when it comes to services such as unemployment insurance, welfare assistance, and health care. Princiotta and Reyna documented that each individual who does not complete high school costs the public \$139,000 in reduced tax payments, \$40,500 in increased public health costs and \$3,000 in increased welfare costs, on average, over a lifetime. Communities are facing issues beyond their monetary grasp. States that report low graduation rates not only risk a loss in economic development, but also risk not providing a pool of applicants who meet the employment requirements. Not having a pool of qualified applicants can serve as a trickle-down effect for problems to come. An unemployed citizen may not see the importance of participating in community-building events or voting. This is what makes the nation what it is today. When the "American Dream," is not actualized, the educational system is called upon. Solutions with

action are needed— not just jotted afterthoughts, but real, live- action taking steps in order to improve the quality of life for all future citizens one student at a time.

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Carnegie unit was introduced to our nation’s education system as a way to measure the attainment of a high school diploma. Today, we liken it to ‘seat time’ in order to determine the amount of credits earned by the student, not how much the student has learned (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). If the mission is to prevent dropouts, the old-fashioned way of educating students must end. Progressively, educational systems might reconsider awarding credit for performance, and not actual time spent in the classroom. Strategic interventions and effective prevention strategies must be implemented to restructure the formation of 21st century schools. Restructured programs must focus on the need to banish the traditional way of educating youth – particularly in areas with a high concentration of dropout factories. Curricula centered on relevant learning, school-to-career opportunities, and sustainability may be the approach.

Prevention Programs

In a largely Latino community located in Philadelphia, a dropout prevention program, *Éxito*, was established. *Éxito*, Spanish for success, began its journey in 2008-2009 as a means for reducing the excessive (42-46 percent) dropout rate in the area. Since its beginnings, *Éxito* has identified what it deemed “early warning indicators” to avert high school dropout candidates. The *Éxito* prevention model has taken the approach to identify and recruit students who show the early warning signs, engage those students in project-based afterschool programs and provide additional case management services to those who are in the greatest of need for support. By the

end of their second evaluation year, Éxito participants and staff recorded an increase in student attendance and decrease in course failure. Staff also recorded positive feedback from student participants ranging from a strong, caring support staff to having the ability to finally feeling success (Hartmann, Good, & Edmunds, 2011).

Expanded learning opportunities (ELO's) offer the same preventative measures that were extended through Éxito, including summer learning opportunities and extended year programs. Effective ELO's offer an extension by supporting academic rigor, boosting student engagement, and providing students supportive opportunities in tutoring and job skills training (Harris & Princiotta, 2009). Quality ELO's can meet the needs of students on all educational levels. On the elementary/middle school level, ELO's provide students extra time and help in areas that require additional assistance. This assistance allows for mastery in such courses as math and reading. On the high school level, connecting the students to real-world learning through the offering of apprenticeships with workforce partnerships extends the training and skills necessary to gain an understanding of the workplace. The Quantum Opportunities Program, which is servicing at-risk ninth grade students in seven cities across the country, has found that the students who participated were 20 percent more likely to graduate from high school than those who did not participate.

Academic Program Models

Re-engaging disconnected youth is no easy feat. Implementing a meaningful, well-organized learning community takes more than the work of any one particular institution. In order to service disconnected youth holistically, all local community and state agency members should develop pathways to provide this service. The Youth Opportunity program (through the

Workforce Investment Act) and the Youthful Offender Reentry Program (through the Department of Labor) successfully reconnect disconnected youth by means of preparing participants in “education enhancement activities, job-readiness and occupational training, internships, support groups and many other activities (Tsoi-A-Fatt et al., 2007). With an enrollment of over 90,000 participants (nationwide), 48% of whom were out-of-school youth, the successes of the Youth Opportunity program have proven more than effective. Likewise, the Youthful Offender Reentry Program has seen impressive measures exceeded in areas of program enrollment and completion and attainment of high school and general educational diplomas. Reengagement has also measured success for local employment agencies that have provided a connection from classroom to workforce.

Re-enrollment Programs

Across the nation, other notable academic design models have taken form in ways that best suit the most required in their areas. Many “second-chance” or re-enrollment programs range in need for disconnected youth who may be ages 16 to 25 who are in need of re-enrollment and job placement to teenage parents who receive welfare benefits. Bloom, Thompson, and Ivry, (2010) determined that based on evaluative studies of the various academic design models, participants were more likely to earn a GED or equivalent in comparison to their counterparts who were non-program participants. Comparatively, immediate communities servicing the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program and Job Corps, saw a significant reduction in arrests, convictions and time spent incarcerated on a four-year study period. Reports indicate overall positive effects on noneconomic outcomes for African-American participants in particular. “African-American women were less likely to become pregnant and African-American men improved on measure of personal and social responsibility” (p.11).

School-to-Career Programs

For those disconnected students who earn a high school diploma or other certificated credential “the payoff to learning must become clearer and more realistic” (Shore, Shore, & Casey, 2009, p. 4). School-to-career programs provide those youth the opportunity to gain critical job skills in order to become fully vested in the ownership of their education. Educational pathways that lead to relevant careers must be able to allow for flexible scheduling outside of the traditional educational realm in order to meet student needs. Extended learning and job-based training must include learning opportunities “in afterschool, weekend, and summer hours” as well (p. 4).

American Graduation Initiative

Entering into the workforce is not the only option available to students. Disconnected youth who delve into the college preparatory arena once completing a high school diploma or equivalent may be another option. As a part of the American Graduation Initiative established in 2009 by the Obama administration, discussion surrounded the potential, disconnected youth have in earning postsecondary credentials (Bloom, et al., 2010). By funding community colleges throughout the nation, this initiative has given many disconnected youth the potential to earn a college certificate and training in their field of interest.

In hopes to reconnect the once disconnected youth, strategies to maintain their enrollment in postsecondary education should be extended to help bolster their retention. Many colleges offer varying strategies for their economically and educationally disadvantaged students. Tutoring is one of those employed strategies. A research study conducted at a public Pennsylvania university found that in a sample of 129 at-risk students, “significant positive

relationships with retention and academic performance demonstrate that tutoring can be effective as a strategy...” (Rheinheimer, Grace-Odeleye, Francois, & Kusorgbor, 2010, p. 23). Proficient peer and professional tutors often serve as excellent role models for at-risk students who may in turn emulate the study habits and attitudes of their peer tutors. Early intervention, with the help of professors, promotes the students’ self-efficacy and likelihood of graduation completion.

Conclusion

The United States’ educational system needs an overhaul. The days of a one-size-fits-all educational system has run its course. Executing a 21st century education takes strategic planning and planners who are diligent in their efforts and dedicated to the idea that a quality education is attainable. With personal beliefs and politics aside, the benefits of an attainable education outweigh the costs that continue to place the nation in a stagnant position. The nation’s leaders, policymakers, teachers, and communities have the manpower and ingenuity to make it happen. Although there is no one perfect solution for solving the dropout dilemma, as a collective body, reforms can regenerate that innovative spirit to propel the nation, once again, into an educational powerhouse contender.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine whether a traditional academic model and a non-traditional academic model are equally effective in leading seniors in an urban, low-income area to meet high school graduation requirements.

Design

The study used a causal-comparative design with a convenience sample to compare graduation rates of seniors who followed a traditional academic model and those who followed a non-traditional academic model. The sample came from the school in which the researcher is an educator. The independent variable was whether or not students were following a traditional or non-traditional academic model. The dependent variable was whether or not they met high school graduation requirements.

Participants

The sample for this study was enrolled high school seniors during the 2012-2013 academic year. The public high school is in an urban area in the mid-Atlantic region. Total school enrollment for the 2012-2013 school year was 409 students; 394 African-American students and 10 white students with 83.9% of the student body eligible as FARMS – free and reduced meal students (the number and percentage of students whose applications for free/reduced price meals meet the family size and income guidelines). Of the 409 students enrolled, 119 were considered senior class enrollees (42 females/77 males). There were 107, 4-year senior enrollees; 10, 5-year senior enrollees; and 2, 6 year senior enrollees. There were a

total of 37 seniors who participated in the traditional model; all 4-year seniors (8 females/29 males). There were 82 students who participated in the non-traditional model; 70, 4-year seniors, 10, 5-year seniors, and 2, 6-year seniors.

Instrument

No formal testing instrument was used in this study. The data derived for testing was based upon whether or not students met the Maryland State graduation requirements (<http://www.marylandpublicschools.org>). These requirements are as follows: earning at least 21 overall credits with a specified number of credits for particular subject areas, passing state standardized testing requirements, and completing at least 75 hours of community service.

Procedure

Graduation data and course grades were collected from the school's guidance department. Thirty-seven total students were considered students in the traditional academic model. For students participating in the traditional model, all required coursework was completed in the classroom setting. The typical school day consists of eight class periods with one 30-minute lunch period. Classes contain, on average, between 15-18 students.

Eighty-two students participated in a non-traditional academic model. There were two alternatives offered through the school – Apex Learning and Transitional Evening School. Both academic models are credit-recovery programs designed to assist students lacking the necessary credits to graduate. Students could be enrolled in one or both academic models concurrently. It should be noted that students who participated in a non-traditional academic model were still held to the same graduation requirements as outlined by the Maryland State Department of

Education – including passing high school assessments and/or bridge plan completion and community service requirements (MSDE, 2013).

Apex Learning credit recovery program is an online standards-based curriculum that offers accelerated coursework in most areas of accreditation. Apex Learning allows students to move at their own pace through the coursework in order to achieve mastery-level content understanding. Students have access during the regular school day with the assistance of an instructor and 24 hour access online at home. Once completed with their assigned coursework, students were assessed based on end-of-unit chapter tests and an overall course assessment. Course completion is designated by a percentage, equivalent to a letter-grading scale system (Apex Learning, 2013).

Transitional Evening School was designed as an alternative means for students to attend school after the traditional school day ended. Transitional Evening School, or TES, began at 3:30 P.M., and ended at 6:00 P.M; with two-one-hour classes with a 30-minute break in between. TES was conducted by classroom teachers in major subject areas - math, English, science, and social studies. Students enrolled in TES attended two classes per semester. This model was offered to those students who either worked during the earlier portion of the traditional school day or had other obligations that prevented them from attending traditional school.

The proportions of traditional academic model and non-traditional academic model students that met high school graduation requirements were compared by a chi-square test.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This causal-comparative study examined the effectiveness between traditional and non-traditional academic models and the rate of graduation success for high school seniors in an urban, low-income area. There were a total of 119 high school seniors enrolled during the 2012-2013 school year. Of those high school seniors enrolled, 37 participated in a traditional academic model, 82 participated in a non-traditional academic model.

A Chi-Square Test was used to compare the proportion of traditional and non-traditional students that met graduation requirements. The null hypothesis indicated that in a year in which some seniors participated in a traditional academic model and other seniors participated in a non-traditional academic model, there would be no significant difference in the proportion of students that graduated. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected – the results were non-significant $X^2(1, N = 119) = 1.38, p = .24$. (See Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies of Traditional and Non-Traditional Students and Graduation Requirement Status and Chi-Square Results

	Met Requirements	Did Not Meet Requirements
Non-Traditional	73	9
Traditional	30	7

$X^2(1, N = 119) = 1.38, p = .24$

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that there was no significant difference between the proportion of seniors who were educated solely in the traditional model and students who participated in the non-traditional model in meeting high school graduation requirements. The null hypothesis for this study failed to be rejected.

Implications of Results

The data revealed that the majority of both traditional and non-traditional students met graduation requirements. The two methods appear to be equally successful in helping students meet graduation goals. Although some individuals may question the value of non-traditional models, those students who opted in or were eligible to take courses through APEX Learning or TES programs were able to meet graduation standards with as much success as traditional students. The results of this study reveal that there is no true distinction between those students who successfully participated in a non-traditional model and those who participated in a traditional model in terms of the likelihood of meeting graduation requirements. The primary goal for offering the two non-traditional methods was to re-engage those students who lagged behind, for various reasons and were not able to comply with traditional school structures. The focus was to ensure that all students were provided an opportunity to earn a high school diploma through a means that best suited their circumstances. However, upon the arrival of the new administrative team, the previous non-traditional trends were omitted in order to change the current “alternative-schooling” climate. The new goal was to ensure that all students gained their educational experience inside of a traditional classroom setting. The adjustment was made not

only in an attempt to return to a model that is perceived by the public as more rigorous, but was also made for budgetary concerns due to the decreased number in student enrollment and staffing availability. Offering both traditional and non-traditional courses is more expensive than just offering traditional classes. Though the current administration shuns the idea of non-traditional options, the results of this study suggest that an alternate academic model may be just as successful in providing students educational support as a traditional model. Although there are greater up-front costs for offering both traditional and non-traditional courses, ultimately the overall costs to society may be less if both models are offered because of the lifetime costs associated with students' not meeting high school graduation requirements. The hope is to build contributing citizens who have a much higher earning potential and who are more likely to be self-sustaining.

Theoretical Implications

Research studies have statistically shown that alternative educational programs service a population of students - roughly 30 to 50 percent - who fail to meet graduation requirements in a traditional school setting due to a mix of varying learning styles, complex personal issues, poor school climate, stressed home environments, and an overall lack of motivation (Tsoi-A-Fatt et al., 2007). When instituted properly, alternative education programs are known to re-engage even those students who had left school prematurely. These programs help students meet their educational needs and assist them by improving their life prospects. The results of this study mirror previously conducted studies that point to the success rate of those students who would have otherwise missed out on a second chance to further themselves along an educational path. Consequently, findings support the theory that non-traditional academic models are a viable

method for helping students meet the educational requirements that will prepare them for the workforce and societal expectations.

Threats to Validity

Within this study there are threats to validity. One threat to the validity of this study related to the characteristics of the students who participated in the non-traditional academic model. Students could end up being a non-traditional student for a variety of reasons. Some of the students may have been over-aged and under-credited due to learning difficulties or due to insufficient engagement in school. These students might be expected to have difficulties in either type of academic model. There are other students, however, who could have ended up being in the non-traditional student track without a history that would suggest academic difficulties. For example, students who lacked a specific amount of credits due to poor academic planning and/or a lack of course offerings could end up being non-traditional students. There very well may have been students who were casualties of the academic planning year in which certain courses were not offered due to a lack of staffing resources. Since the current study grouped these two types of non-traditional students together, the results cannot be generalized specifically to over-aged and under-credited students who are considered at high academic risk. This is a threat to external validity.

An additional validity concern related to the characteristics of the participating students, those involved in the study were not randomly assigned to conditions. For some of the students, it was solely their decision as to which academic model they would pursue. The variety offered by the academic models perhaps appealed to a certain audience of students based upon the individual needs of the students. For instance, for a student who worked during the early

morning to afternoon, TES hours were more conducive with their work schedule versus the traditional model hours. There was selection bias in group membership so that subjects with particular characteristics were more likely to be in one group than the other (e.g. a student with many non-school obligations would be more likely to be in the non-traditional group). The two models may not have been equally effective for all students. For example, a student with multiple family and work obligations who selected then non-traditional model and was successful might not have been successful if randomly assigned to the traditional model.

A threat to the internal validity was that the outcome measure was meeting graduation requirements. Students may have passed the required coursework but did not meet graduation requirements because they failed the High School Assessment (H.S.A.), submitted an incomplete bridge project(s), or did not complete their state-mandated service learning hours. Consequently, there were multiple factors besides the type of educational model that could have influenced the outcome variable.

Connections to Previous Studies

Previously conducted studies have shown non-traditional academic models help to reconnect some students to opportunities they may have not been afforded through a traditional academic model. For this study, 89% of the 2012-2013 senior class enrolled in a non-traditional model and met state-mandated graduation requirements within five years. Nationally recognized programs such as Job Corps and the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe have met with success as non-traditional education models. Job Corps offers educational and training opportunities to youth 16-24. Within a four-year span of time, 42 percent of the student population earned a GED or equivalent and 38 percent went on to earn a vocational or trade certificate (Bloom et al.,

2010). Similarly, National Guard Youth ChalleNGe, who services 16-18 year olds, showed that 61 percent of the program group studied earned a GED or a diploma within 21 months after enrollment.

One difference between the non-traditional model in the current study and the ones in Job Corps and National Guard Youth ChalleNGe is the extent of the intervention beyond basic academic instruction. Job Corps and National Guard Youth ChalleNGe offer on-site residential or quasi-military communities. The environment in which the students participate in these programs allows for complete concentration on their studies and/or trade, removing them from undesirable circumstances at home. For students who are attempting to follow a path of success, supportive learning environments help to shift the focus from unnecessary distractions to the focus at hand – education. In the current study, however, students returned home at the end of their school day. Although an on-site residential community was unavailable, statistical data in the current study sustains the idea that students who participate in a regionally-located, non-traditional model are capable of meeting graduation success without being removed from their home environment. For some students, an on-site residential concept may be the key component needed for their academic success, while for others location may not be a factor in their achievement equation.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should consider whether life-events hinder the educational track of those who participate in a non-traditional academic model. Research can examine the impact of life-changing events such as incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and homelessness on students and how those factors play a role in their overall academic career. A sample group of students who

had experienced known life-changing events may add another research dimension to the study. For this study, 21 percent of the students who participated in the non-traditional model were teenage parents, previously incarcerated, and/ or taking care of family members who were incapacitated due to health conditions. All of those students graduated within five years. Although the students took on average five years to complete their degree, they were able to fulfill the necessary requirements in order to graduate. It would be helpful to investigate whether the non-traditional educational model played an important role in their success. A future study could randomly assign these types of students to traditional and non-traditional models and compare graduation rates. The study could also investigate personality characteristics of these students to determine if there is an interaction effect between personality characteristics and success in the two types of models. Understanding the effect of these factors upon students' academic careers will provide insight to their resilience or lack thereof when faced with such adverse situations.

In considering non-traditional academic models, another research study could examine the effectiveness of the APEX Learning model and that of the Transitional Evening School model. Researchers could determine whether the schedule flexibility and course acceleration offered by an online program is efficient in comparison to small, learning environments facilitated by guided teacher instruction in an evening school program. This study would be approached in two ways: 1) researchers would purposely assign students to each of the programs based upon their personal learning styles to see if differentiated learning environments make a difference in their overall success rate, and 2) researchers would randomly assign students to each of the programs to determine if students who participate in online coursework or evening school are more

receptive to, and successful in, following either the independent learning style or teacher-directed instruction.

Another research study could analyze the post effects of educational and vocational schooling of both traditional and non-traditional academic models. The study could investigate whether or not both types of models are equally effective in preparing students for life after they have received their diplomas. Measures to be considered would include (but are not limited to) income-earning potential, necessary skill building for employment, and social self-sufficiency. Researchers could examine a selected group of high school seniors who participated in both models and follow their paths into adulthood (to age 25). The study could focus on how capable they are in adapting to life's circumstances by using the skills provided by their educational experience. Areas to be examined include the type of employment or schooling sought after graduation, whether or not the students were able to maintain employment and /or enrollment in school, and everyday social situations.

One last study could evaluate the impact a residential setting has on students who participate in an on-site, non-traditional education facility, as compared to those who participate in a non-traditional model in a local high school. The study would take one group of students who participate in a non-traditional model (similar to the current study) and another group who participate in a related, non-traditional model but live on a school's residential campus. The focus of the study would be to examine the effectiveness of a controlled, residential environment and whether or not students are more academically focused and successful in their diploma completion in comparison to students who are not removed from their home environments. Additionally, the research could also include whether the change in the students' environment affects their social development.

Summary

The objective of this study was to determine whether or not students who participate in a non-traditional academic model were more or equally successful in fulfilling their high school graduation requirements as their traditional academic model counterparts. This study included two alternative academic models, APEX Learning and Transitional Evening School, as non-traditional means to a completion of high school in a low socio-economic status urban high school. It was found that there was no significant difference in the proportions of students that graduated from both models. Both traditional and non-traditional academic models provide a notable means of success for students. Essentially, providing educational opportunities to ensure achievement for all students is the objective to any successful academic program.

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