Power, Identity and the Dilemma of College Student Departure

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College student departure is one of the most studied areas in the higher education literature. Our practical concern is generally to maintain a constant flow into the “pipeline” on the one hand, and to stem the tide of students out of academe on the other. Our theoretical concern is often based on trying to understand the functions of various phenomena and their relationship to college leave-taking. What has come to be known as “Tinto’s model” (Tinto, 1975; 1993; Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson, 1997) has had the most pervasive influence on our thinking about why students leave, and what institutions might do to ensure that they stay. The crux of the model hinges on ideas related to rituals of academic and social assimilation into the mainstream of college life.

I have critiqued Tinto’s model from a cultural perspective that is informed by critical theory (Tierney, 1992a; 1992b). My purpose here is neither to rehash concerns raised in previous work nor to offer yet another exegesis on the scaffolding of critical theory and postmodernism (Tierney, 1993; Tierney and Rhoads, 1993). Rather, I have three objectives. I first will consider the idea of culture and how it influences our conceptions of student departure. I then will posit a model based on critical notions of power and community; I conclude by examining how such a model might be employed as an intervention for those students who are most at risk of departing from college - low income, urban, Black and Hispanic youth.

My goal is straightforward. The model I will offer stands in contrast to some of the basic tenets of a functional model of dropouts. And yet, certain characteristics of the model interact with, or extend, what the functionalists appear to suggest. The model also demonstrates what a cultural view involves “in the real world;” rightfully so, one of the major criticisms of critical
theory is that individuals can not envision what often abstract ideas look like when they are employed.

The scaffolding for the model derives from a college preparation program I have studied for the last year that is located in south central Los Angeles - the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI). As I will elaborate in the final section, NAI accurately reflects a commitment to cultural integrity and educational reform in a manner distinctly different from traditional mainstream efforts at helping urban youth get into, and graduate from, college. My assumption is that if we understand the basic tenets of what works for college preparation programs for low income minority youth, we will be able to use such a model for those same individuals once they set foot on college campuses.

The cultural construction of dropouts

We often forget that however “real” classrooms, schools, and universities may be, at their base we build them through cultural constructions of what we mean by words such as “classroom,” “school,” or “university.” The words we use to infuse such entities with meaning vary by time, circumstance, and context. A simplistic way to make sense of such a comment is to create a taxonomy about the different meanings people have of similar words. From this perspective, a classroom in Guatemala is organized differently from a classroom in south central Los Angeles. How teachers organize students and how they conduct their classes in an upper class high school in Beverly Hills is certainly different from the high school classrooms I observe in a poor neighborhood in south central Los Angeles. The educational expectations and degree attainment that an upper class family has for their son or daughter differs greatly from parents
either in rural Guatemala or inner city Los Angeles who may never have graduated from high school, much less college.

Words and ideas mean something different as well. There is a saying in the Koran that goes, “The teacher is like the prophet and you must respect him.” Surely the authority of a teacher in an Islamic country is greater than that of a teacher in a country where television shows frequently ridicule or make fun of the teaching profession. In some cultures the idea of “dropout” does not exist, whereas elsewhere the educational system is a filter that sorts and separates individuals according to any number of variables.

And yet, I mean something more by referring to the “cultural construction” of dropouts than merely that different people do things differently. The culture in which we live and work and learn is not inherited whole cloth and unchangeable. In large part we are involved in the creation of meaning throughout our lives, and the interpretations we bring to different organizations offer our own unique insights about events, people, and actions. “Guatemalans” do not see the world in a particular manner any more than the “upper class” or believers of “Islam” act in one, lock-step manner. McDermott and Varenne are helpful here:

The coherence of any culture is not given by members being the same, nor by members knowing the same things. Instead, the coherence of a culture is crafted from the partial and mutually dependent knowledge of each person caught in the process and depends, in the long run, on the work they do together. Life in culture, Bakhtin reminds us, is polyphonous and multi vocalic; it is made of the voices of many, each one brought to life and made significant by others (1995, p. 326).
Culture is the difficult negotiation between understanding the implicit interpretations that have been built over time and our reconstruction of such meanings. On the one hand, if we believe that culture is fixed and determined and that all people act in one fashion then we do injustice to the rich fabric of individuals and groups that exists in any one culture at a given time. Human agency is denied and individual action accounts for little more than appearing as if we are all bit players in an absurdist drama. On the other hand, to ignore the very real cultures that we step into and out of in our daily lives and in our organizations suggests that individuals are free to make of life whatever they want regardless of history, culture, or social context.

Those who adhere to a structural view of the world subscribe to the former notion, and most importantly, for the purpose of this text, those who call upon Tinto’s model utilize the latter. One interprets the universe and then changes it according to desires and goals. However much we might like to feel that we can change the world, my concern is that without struggling to understand how that world has been constructed we are doing little more than reinscribing notions of power and privilege for those who have had an active hand in determining those very relations of power. The assumption is that individual struggle is certainly essential in order for one to succeed; yet we can not overlook that individual actions exist within socio-historical cultural constraints that have denied opportunity to some and afforded others great benefits. Issues of racism and sexism, among others, have been embedded in the way American education has been structured throughout our history. However much we struggle to change our present contexts we must also acknowledge that current actions are framed in light of historical and cultural parameters.
Such a concern is particularly germane to discussions about education in general, and dropouts in particular. The framework for what we desire of education and what we mean by dropout has been developed by way of our culture. There is no scientific law, for example, that asserts that when a group of individuals compose a cultural category called “students” and they participate in another cultural term labeled “school,” that some of these “students” will “dropout.” Surely we could have developed a system where everyone stayed to completion. Or we could have developed a system where everyone drops-out; we might have created a system where individuals come and go into educational settings throughout their lives and the length of period for which an individual stays at any one time is irrelevant. Instead, we have created a system where there are winners and losers. Some students stay; others dropout.

Increasingly, the consequences of dropping out are quite severe. As manufacturing jobs move to the third world, workers in the United States need to rely on advanced skills often learned in postsecondary education. In 1979, for example, a male college graduate earned 49% more than a male with only a high school degree, and today that gap has grown to over 83% (Tierney, 1998). Although I am not suggesting that everyone must have a four year degree, I am highlighting that the consequences are more severe today than ever before for those who dropout. Such a realization provokes at least three commentaries. The structuralist often has the fewest responses; if the system is predetermined then there is little we can do short of revolution to change systemic shortcomings to stem the flow of dropouts. My concern with this position is that it denies human agency and suggests that whatever actions we take are fruitless. As I will suggest, there are programs that made a difference in overcoming historical inequities; to do nothing verges on nihilism.
The functionalist devises ways to mend the perceived problem. It is from this perspective that we act on models such as Tinto’s where we try to put together ways to enable more individuals to stay in college. My concern is that we inadequately address the structures and meanings of the world. In effect, the system is hemorrhaging and rather than treat the problem we try to slow the bleeding. The metaphor is purposeful. I certainly appreciate campus based programs that try to stop individuals from dropping out of college, but those of us involved in campus remediation efforts need to act less like emergency room medics and more like preventive physicians. We need to redesign a system whose effect is that it casts individuals aside if they do not meet predetermined criteria. In a culture we all have a hand in creating our challenge is to ensure that everyone has a fruitful role in society that enables voice and empowerment.

The third response is what I elaborate on in the following pages where we accept the consequences of “dropping out” and certainly struggle to alleviate painful consequences for individuals involved in the system; nevertheless we accept that terms such as “drop out” are neither neutral nor scientific. The import of a cultural view of terms such as drop out is twofold. First, we move from an individualistic analysis to one that also incorporates an understanding of groups, power and oppression. Surely previous research on tracking (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, etal 1992; Fine 1991) underscores how students are sorted and filtered not so much according to their abilities, but because of who they are - be they girls, ethnic minorities, the poor, or their counterparts - boys, Anglos, the upper class. When we define some individuals as “disabled” either implicitly or explicitly we also have defined others as “abled.”

A cultural view of schooling seeks to expose and understand what terms such as drop-out mean beyond surface interpretations. In this light, “drop-out” means something more than
merely that a student is no longer in school. We learn, for example, that the supposedly neutral term “drop-out” is identified with those who are most often powerless and disabled by the culture in which they live and participate.

Once we learn that culture exists through powerful definitions that enable some and disable others, we are then able to investigate issues such as the hidden curriculum, the social organization of classrooms, and inherent pedagogical practices that occur everyday. From such studies we learn how power operates through culture’s webs. We find, for example, that “low ability groups are taught less frequently and are subjected to more control by the teacher. . . . Students in low-ability reading groups spend more reading time on decoding activities, whereas students in high-ability groups spend more time on text comprehension and deriving the meaning of stories” (Mehan, 1996). Our understanding of what works, and how we are to help people learn takes on a new approach. “Culture is not a property,” note McDermott and Varenne, “of individuals-as-conditioned” (1995, p. 344). Instead, we investigate the properties and interpretations of the culture in order to come to terms with how some are silenced and others privileged.

Of consequence, a cultural response to stem the tide of dropouts takes on a different framework. We surely seek to enable students to come to grips with the multiple phenomena that hold them back. In effect, we aim to equip students with the necessary cultural capital to succeed within the system that exists, but in doing so, we seek to disrupt the process. Rather than have students reproduce the social order of the classroom that divides some between have’s and the other’s as have not’s, the struggle becomes to obviate a culture that organizes individuals in such a way. In what follows, I suggest a framework that incorporates a cultural view of the world
where students hold onto and affirm their own embedded identities while they function and succeed within the received culture of schooling in the late 20th century.

Culture framed

The framework developed here follows from the assumption that power’s grasp has a direct relationship with the achievement that minority students face in educational settings in general, and postsecondary institutions in particular. That is, power relations already existent in the larger society frequently get transformed in educational organizations as failure for those who are on the margins. The model proposed stands in contrast, and yet, ultimately complements what has been previously delineated with regard to college student leave-taking. In the past we have suggested that students need to be integrated into the fabric of the institution, that both academic and social integration needs to take place, and that we ought to view college as a ritualistic transition point from one stage to another. In large part, the onus in such a model is on the individual. The individual integrates; the individual undergoes the ritual; the individual finds ways to fit into the academic and social milieu of the institution.

What I am suggesting is that we turn the model on its head. We develop a framework which has the negotiation of identity in academe as central to educational success. The interactions that students, teachers, parents and families have and how we approach the definitions of these interactions is key to an individual’s success, failure, leave-taking or completion. Rather than a model that assumes that students must fit into what is often an alien culture and that they leave their own culture, I argue the opposite. The challenge is to develop ways where an individual’s identity is affirmed, honored and incorporated into the organization’s culture. The model rests on five key points: (1) collaborative relations of power; (2) connections
across home, community, and schooling; (3) local definitions of identity; (4) excellence; and (5) academic support.

Collaborative relations of power Power is not a fixed quantity that operates within a zero-sum logic. The problem with the idea of fixed relations of power is that some groups and their practices end up as deviant and subordinate and others are mainstream and superior. The only possibility for those without power is to become more like those in power or to express resistance by way of leave-taking or behavior that is likely to be deemed “anti-social.” Simply stated, either someone adapts and assimilates, or remains aloof and is mal-adapted.

I am suggesting we consider an alternative logic. Power is neither fixed, predetermined or static. People generate power by way of the cultures in which they operate. Consider again the comment above by McDermott and Varenne: culture is polyphonic; what culture becomes is determined by the multiple individual and group relations in which people function and develop meaning. As Cummins notes, “participants in the relationship are empowered through their collaboration such that each is more affirmed in his or her identity and has a greater sense of efficacy to create change in his or her life or social situation” (1997, p. 424). The elaboration of one’s identity, rather than ignoring such issues or trying to incorporate identity-work into unquestioned organizational norms, becomes central. The challenge in programs that seek to prevent dropouts is neither to develop ways for people to integrate into the system, but instead to change that system by way of programs, activities, events and curricula that affirm and honor individual identities. As I will discuss, the definitions that educators develop when we work from a collaborative perspective is dramatically different from a framework that seeks to assimilate individuals into a static social context where power goes unquestioned and identity is assumed.
Connections across home, community and schooling One viewpoint works from the assumption that where an individual comes from is relatively unimportant, perhaps even harmful. From this perspective, a school or university has arbitrary rules, standards, procedures and definitions of excellence. What one merits in this organization depends entirely upon an individual’s efforts. Accordingly, if we want students to succeed we emphasize skills. Since there are limited resources, time, and programs, the challenge is to ensure academic success.

Tinto’s model highlights that social integration is also critical, but such integration begins from the institutional perspective rather than from the vantage point of the individual. Social integration works from the idea that the kind of social activities and the form of these events is relatively unimportant; what matters is that students become integrated. As with Durkheim’s work on anomie, the overriding factor in success (or prevention of suicide) is when an individual feels part of a larger social order. Unlike Durkheim’s analysis, the functionalist model of dropout prevention assumes that the background of an individual is relatively unimportant as long as he or she can identify with social activities in the college or university.

The approach suggested here, however, begins by pointing out the critical importance of affirming student identity. One can not develop successful programs unless we acknowledge the particular backgrounds of those whom we seek to educate. To decontextualize the activities developed for learning from student lives is to assume that identity is similar and static - or should be - and if those who participate can not fit in then they have failed. An alternative framework is to develop programs that are palpably local in definition. We begin by working from where students are. The assumption that a ritual of transition is necessary for students to succeed is
rejected in favor of activities that affirm the identities, homes and communities in which individuals live and grow.

Local definitions of identity I can not emphasize enough the importance of beginning where students are “at,” - intellectually, socially, emotionally - rather than working toward academic abstractions. Minority youth, be they Native American students from an Indian reservation, inner-city black adolescents who grow up in a housing project, Mexican immigrants who live in a barrio, or any number of other individuals who see themselves as part of a group where postsecondary campuses are alien territory, need to have teachers, tasks and pedagogies that affirm who they are. In a text about successful community based organizations Milbrey McLaughlin notes that “localness assumes strong ties to the community so that programs can shape and be shaped by their context” (1993, p. 58). Although the settings may differ somewhat for different colleges and universities, the emphasis needs to be the same. Teachers, curricula, and organizational frameworks incorporate the identities of students into their frameworks.

What might such a comment imply? I have previously pointed out how teachers of Native American students may be well versed in their particular subject area, - geology, calculus, European history, and the like - but they frequently have no understanding of the students whom they teach (Tierney, 1992c). If one wants to be not merely a purveyor of information and subject matter, but also a transformative intellectual who seeks to challenge and engage students to perform to the best of their ability then of consequence we come to terms with the backgrounds and forces that have shaped those individuals who sit in our classes. Department chairs, deans, and hiring committees will take into account how teachers view students and how the organization teaches new instructors about the backgrounds of their students. Compare such an
idea to what actually happens: all but a handful of institutions neither have discussions nor programs that orient faculty to how to improve learning based on student identity. Social integration may well not reside in programs where race is “whited out” but instead work to enhance multicultural programming and understanding for all students.

The framework assumes that “students from dominated societal groups are empowered or disabled as a direct result of their interactions with educators” (Cummins, 1986, p. 21). The manner in which we empower students is based on a cultural understanding of their local contexts and how such understandings might be incorporated into the basic fabric of the institution. Obviously, I am not suggesting that educators mindlessly include all aspects of someone’s local context into educational programming and curricula. Dysfunctional families, neighborhoods, and communities, reside with all groups, regardless of race, income, or locale. Abusive relationships are certainly not to be celebrated. Indeed, one function of progressive programming is to enable students to feel safe enough to discuss the problems they face and help them filter out destructive aspects of their locales such as drugs, crime, and polyester suits, and still affirm their core identities. When black students equate being black with crime and drug use we work from a deficit model that assumes a particular group is subordinate; in order for them to succeed they must “act white.” The approach called for here breaks the equation of race and deviant behavior and actively works to form an inclusive identity.

*Excellence* One additional factor that educators must deal with in students labeled “at-risk” or who are in danger of dropping out is the lowering of expectations so that one’s aspirations are leveled rather than raised. With such an approach teachers, programs and institutions convey high expectations to students and create a climate within the classroom and on
campus that everyone can learn and will succeed. In inner-city schools we often find the opposite messages being transmitted to students. Discussions about college are infrequent, and when they occur, they often revolve around attendance at a community college rather than four year institutions. College preparation classes are frequently non-existent. When students arrive at the institution they find themselves labeled in one way or another that inevitably lowers their own and their teachers’ expectations. Faculty spend less time on demanding excellence from their students and coaching individuals about how to improve their study skills.

Over the last generation we have heard frequent attacks on equity-based policies such as affirmative action or “remedial” education on college campuses. One of the main critiques is that such policies and their recipients lower standards and dilute excellence. I suggest that no one is well served if beneficiaries of affirmative action or other policies aimed at increasing minority representation in academe do not set high, measurable standards. The problems do not reside with programs such as affirmative action, but with those who interpret them as anything less than methods to achieve high performance (Tierney, 1997). Program effectiveness means nothing if we stem the tide of dropouts from college or increase college-going for different groups, but the students themselves have not been placed in programs that enable them to flourish to their highest potential.

*Academic support* The model I am trying to develop works from the idea that those individuals who have been labeled “at-risk” or are likely to dropout have much greater potential than previous frameworks suggest. Programs that see individuals as broken and in need of repair are less likely to create the conditions for success than those programs that assume students are a valuable resource to themselves, their families, communities and society. Negative discussions
about someone’s shortcomings or their inability to perform is eschewed in favor of dialogues of respect that affirm the potential of the individual. The key word here is respect. However different in age, learning, or educational degree, those programs that honor a student’s position are more like to help the student succeed than programs that concentrate solely on erasing perceived and/or real academic shortcomings.

Respect acknowledges that even though students may have families without college degrees or a formal educational background, they have knowledge and strengths in ways the teachers do not. Alliances with parents and families are essential in this model; consider how dramatically different such an approach is from one that may implicitly reject the role of families in college education, or more likely, ignore the students’ families with the false assumption that because they not been to college they can not play a useful role in getting their child into college.

A collaborative, supportive environment, writes Cummins, explicitly “encourages minority parents to participate in promoting their children’s academic progress” (1986, p. 27). Academic support becomes active, explicit. Although there are certainly egregious examples of teachers or programs that seem to set out to negate the self-worth of an individual, the larger problem that I am concerned with pertains to the more mundane aspects of educational life. We may not negate a student’s background or family, but we all too often ignore or overlook it, which in a way, also negates identity. This model suggests the opposite. If we are to improve academic performance, we concentrate on the individual’s identity and background.

Implementing the model and implications for college retention

What are the practical consequences for the kind of model I have suggested? How might such a model differ from other programs? The Neighborhood Academic Initiative, (NAI) located
in south central Los Angeles has worked over the last eight years to implement the framework
developed above. I have offered elsewhere a case study of the project to demonstrate how they
work with low income minority youth and the successes they have had (Tierney and Jun, in
preparation). In what follows I draw on the attributes of NAI to show how one might develop a
culturally responsive program. My singular caution is that I am not suggesting that one formulaic
response meets the needs of all program types and students. As others have noted, (Dryfoos,
1990; McLaughlin, 1993), the key ideas in the development of such projects are flexibility and
responsiveness. Students arrive at educational settings with a multitude of issues and concerns
that need to be addressed. If we are to follow the basic tenets of what I have outlined above we
need to be responsive to the learner, which in turn, necessitates programmatic and personal
flexibility.

Figure One About Here

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative is a college preparation program aimed at
educating junior high and high school students so that they are able to enter college. Each year
NAI accepts roughly 35 students into their program. Students are drawn from two schools in a
low income neighborhood, and they are purposefully not the honors students. Instead, all a
student needs to have is a C average, the desire to enter the program, and the support of one adult
guardian. The program is in addition to attendance at the “scholar’s” regular school. All
students take classes for two hours prior to the start of the regular school day; classes begin at 7
AM. Students also have after-school activities, week-end classes, a summer intensive program,
and their parent or guardian also must attend periodic weekend workshops.
Activities range from English and Math classes, to individual and group counseling about personal problems and the awareness of what one must do to gain entrance to college. A great deal of effort and time is spent on discussing the discipline that a “scholar” needs to succeed, and how everyone must help one another follow the rules of the program. Virtually every activity I have seen has some discussion of values clarification that affirms the import of the youth’s background on the one hand, and discusses bad behavior on the other (e.g. drug use, cheating). The model works from five departure points that parallel the assumptions noted above. In what follows I return to the points listed above and offer how abstract ideas such as “local definitions of identity” get enacted at NAI.

**Collaborative relations of power: Positive self definitions** Teachers, counselors and the program director constantly reiterate the strengths of the children involved in the program. All students are called “scholars” to emphasize their academic potential. The climate in and outside of the classrooms is one where teachers are equated with valued resources who are on the students’ side and will create a safe space where learning will occur. Although the teachers and counselors remind students of the responsibility they have to succeed, students are also involved in a setting that assumes success.

Throughout the program’s activities the orientation is that the youths have personal tasks that he or she must attend to in order to ensure that they meet their goals; nevertheless, no one exists in a climate of “sink or swim.” Instead, adults guide the adolescents and constantly reaffirm the basic tenets of the program that exist in a contract each person signs (appendix a). Parenthetically, the vast majority of students are either African American or Hispanic; the contract is written in English and Spanish. Those who direct the program have developed a rigorous
structure that demands students rise to the standards that have been met. The program also recognizes the often quite difficult challenges low income adolescents face en route to adulthood. How does one respond when your brother tries to get you to join a gang? What should you do if your best friend gets pregnant? A multitude of quite perplexing questions face these students and the program’s thrust is twofold: The adults who run the program are models of trust and respect who students turn to for guidance and support. The program is also a safe space that enables the students to stay focused on gaining an education.

*Connections: Family involvement* As noted, one way to work with children from low income neighborhoods is to assume that families either should be kept away or ignored. Families where rampant drug use exists, for example, might be assumed to be unable to help young people with college work. NAI works from the opposite perspective. One component of the program is that a family member or guardian must sign on to be involved in the activities of the project. Family involvement has a double role. When NAI educates a student the directors believe that they must involve those other primary care individuals in an educational experience as well. Oftentimes that will mean that Saturday seminars deal with topics about how a mother or father might help their child by encouraging him or her to study, how to talk about sex, or how to interact with teachers in a positive and supportive way. The schools frequently are seen as alien institutions that do not seek the best interest of an individual’s child. The work of NAI is to demonstrate to the family and community how they can best get involved and support teachers and counselors, which in turn, helps the children. In effect, NAI has taken the notion of cultural capital beyond merely the individual and extended it to the scholar’s primary relationships. If we are to have students enter and graduate from college, then of necessity, we need to enable
multiple individuals to become involved in efforts aimed at helping the child. In addition to educating the family about their own responsibilities, the other role of familial involvement is that it conveys to the student/scholar that he or she does not need to drop his or her identity in order to be successful. Family involvement affirms, rather than rejects or ignores, the import of identity.

*Local definitions of identity: Dealing with racism* NAI begins from a framework that assumes racism exists and that black and Hispanic youth have a particular challenge to face if they are to succeed. At the same time, no one in the program allows students to blame racism for a bad test grade or their own particular mistakes or foibles. Indeed, one often hears comments that simultaneously acknowledges that discrimination exists but also points out that the task of the NAI Scholar is to figure out ways to overcome it.

Matute-Bianchi has pointed out that “to participate in class discussions, to carry books from class to class, to ask the teacher for help in front of others, to expend effort to do well in school - are efforts that are viewed derisively, condescendingly, and mockingly” by other minority students (1986, p. 255). Her point is that local identities reject schooling when education is seen as antithetical to one’s background. NAI works assiduously to combat such stereotypes from two perspectives.

First, teachers and administrators are often African American or Hispanic; frequently, positive role models from a university or the community speak to the students stressing the import of college education. Second, because racism exists not only by Anglos but across all groups one emphasis of the program is to eradicate racist tendencies with all students. Derisive language, stereotypes or ethnic grouping of black students vs. Hispanic students is vigorously rejected in favor of an approach that accentuates pride in one’s heritage and respect for others.
Excellence: Standards  
NAI has been likened to a loving boot camp. Classes start on time and if someone is late he or she needs to apologize to the other Scholars for retarding the progress of learning. Teachers point out mistakes to students and constantly ask what students will do to overcome an error. Silence in a class, adherence to rules about attendance, and a host of other policies set a tone that highlights the focus of the program: education. Noguera has spoken about a similar kind of schooling by summarizing that students noted “that the teachers they admired most were academically demanding ones who worked hard to make their classes interesting” (1996, p. 232). The same may be said of NAI’s scholars. Although each student occasionally was criticized, the adolescents reiterated that the discipline and the climate of the classroom enabled them to focus on their studies and not become distracted.

In part, this focus on excellence succeeds because the students also acknowledge that everyone cares about them. The teachers, administrators, counselors and director were portrayed by the students as people who understood the kinds of challenges the students faced and did not put them down. The safety of the learning environment was constantly reiterated as a theme that enabled students to accept their task and actually begin to think about going to college. One final point pertains to definitions of excellence. In some schools with a similar population merely graduation from high school might be considered an achievement; in other schools similar students are tracked to the community college. In NAI, however, the entire emphasis is constantly on getting students into four year institutions. Again, the point was not to put down those students who would have a better educational experience at a community college; rather, NAI tries to help students sort out what they want to do and struggles to ensure that in a
students’s decision-making all options exist, rather than ones that are circumscribed due to the environment in which he or she lives.

*Academic support: Collecting data* Obviously, from the sketches I have provided this is a program that begins from very different premises of students than most traditional programs. True, grade point averages and test scores play a role in student selection. How students do on quizzes and exams in their classes is also of paramount importance. The attainment of the honor roll or graduating with honors is precisely the kind of act that NAI tries to teach family members to cherish and honor.

Nevertheless, students are never reduced to numbers or simple descriptions. The Scholars are looked on as unique, talented individuals who have a wealth of potential that can be tapped and utilized for his or her own good, as well as the good of the entire community. The analysis of student progress is an intensive and multi-faceted examination of the struggles the student faces, how he or she adapts to these struggles, and what the program might do to increase student productivity. Consider the focus of such a program when compared to the traditional model that assumes students need to fit in and adapt to what already exists.

There is a delicate balance that exists in NAI between the constant emphasis on student achievement and the rejection of excuses or laziness on a scholar’s part on the one hand. And yet, on the other, the instructors and the overall program accept the responsibility for designing success. They acknowledge that they can not make students do their homework, listen in class, or learn to do well on examinations. The teachers and counselors also recognize that without an explicitly structured academic environment aimed at success and excellence the chances these adolescents face is quite slim.
Conclusion

The demise of affirmative action and the fiscal cutbacks in public higher education is cause for grave concern for those of us who maintain a desire to ensure equal access and participation to postsecondary education. I have pointed out a model that employs a cultural framework for analyzing student participation. The model has been used successfully by individuals involved in a college preparation program for low income urban minority youth. My assumption is that the basic tenets of the framework apply throughout the educational life-span and not only for adolescents in high school. To be sure, different groups necessitate different strategies. Familial involvement may not require a parent’s participation, but a spouse or life partner for someone who is an adult. A professor may play a different role in a classroom from that of a high school teacher for students who are in college.

Nevertheless, a cultural model affords us a theoretical and policy-oriented lens’ to study college student departure in a dramatically different way from the traditionalists’ framework. At a time when access to public higher education is under fire, we must develop and enhance the way we see the world so that we might change that world. My argument has been that we need a more robust discussion of what we mean by college student departure so that we might inform our actions on campuses to ensure greater equity and excellence.
Bibliography


