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INTRODUCTION

Education today is more diverse than ever (Geiger 2020). The United States has made strides towards a more equitable educational experience for students. High School and College students are more diverse than their predecessors, but they are still facing many of the same issues of education inequality. I will be looking at the issue of educational inequality by focusing on high dropout rates and low retention rates for students of color. For high school students, I will be focusing on dropout rates, and for college students, I will be focusing on retention rates. Retention rates are measured by: 1) how students are retained from fall term in year one to spring term in year one, and 2) how students are retained from fall term in year one to fall term in year two.

I focus on retention rates and statistics relating to graduating within 6 years for college students because it is often difficult and imprecise to measure higher education dropout rates as many students don't formally "drop out," they simply do not enroll in the next semester. I found that the number of students who graduate within six years is fewer than 2/3, which is considered low (U.S. Dept of Education 2021). Graduation rates are even lower for some races and not others. Only 42% of Black and 56% of Hispanic students nationally graduate within six years, which is below the national average (63%), and below the rate for white students nationally, at 66% (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018)

This means that students who enter higher education and do not graduate lose out on a million-dollar bonus to their lifetime earnings (on average earning \$21k per year less), as well as most likely have some level of debt without an increased chance of higher earnings (Hanson 2021). The overall lost earnings due to dropouts total up to 3.8 billion dollars a year (Hanson 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

High School Dropout Rates

In recent years, the issue of high school dropouts has attracted increasing attention from policymakers, researchers, and teachers. For most of the 20th century dropping out was normal for students and sometimes even the expected result, especially for students of color. In 1940 more than 60% of people ages 25-29 did not finish high school (Alexander and Rivitch 1996). This issue has become better understood in the past few decades as a serious and complex social and educational issue that will have a lasting impact on the rest of society. By 1980 the dropout rate plummeted to just 16% (Rumberger 1987). Dropping out of high school has caused people to face serious education and social capital problems, severely limiting their social and economic well-being for the rest of their lives.

In 2019, there were 2 million high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24, and the overall dropout rate was 5.1%, which was 3.2% lower than in 2010 (U.S. Dept of Education 2021). Dropout rates continue to decrease, but the issue that we're focusing on now is that some groups have significantly higher dropout rates than others. The following outlines dropout rates by race: Asian (1.8%), White (4.1%), two or more races(5.1%), Black (5.6%), Hispanic (7.7%), Pacific Islander (8.0%), Native American (9.6%) (U.S. Department of Education 2021). Now,

the question remains why the dropout rate of certain races is several times higher than that of other races.

Although more and more students of color are enrolling in higher education than ever before, there is still a noticeable success gap between races. Many researchers, like the National Center for Educational Statistics, use “Drop out” as a way to refer to students who leave education and don’t return, even if they don’t formally “drop out”. 52% of Black students and 53% of Native American students drop out of 4-year colleges, this is compared to only 42% of white students dropping out (National Center for Educational Statistics 2019).

Possible Explanations for High Drop-Out Rates Among High School Students

In the literature, there appear to be two theoretical perspectives on why high school dropout rates are so different based on race. The first perspective, which uses race-conflict theory, points to racial discrimination, bias, and low expectations as being the cause of student of color dropout rates (Lewis and Diamond 2015). The first perspective can be seen in the book “Despite the Best Intentions” by Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond. The book dives deep into the issue of the educational achievement gap between races, which could be a contributing factor to high dropout rates for students of color. In this book, the researchers control for any resource or poverty explanation for lower performance by students of color by looking at a solidly well-off school that is racially diverse (Lewis and Diamond 2015).

Through their research, Lewis and Diamond (2015) find that teachers and faculty seem to have some form of bias against students of color. This includes teachers having low expectations of students of color, which is noticed by the students. Collective narratives become racial ideologies, which explain away discrepancies in treatment and normalize differences in

educational outcomes. This influences student achievement because it affects how students feel they fit in their school community; if they are valued, respected, and cared for by their community. There is also a disparity in who is perceived as needing punishment and who needs to be understood and empathized with, which is called differential selection (Lewis and Diamond 2015).

The researchers also noticed how white privilege protects white students because there is a recognized trend that white parents will use their social capital to defend their children from punishment (Diamond and Lewis 2015). Social capital, which is the value of someone's social network, plays a large role in the differential treatment of students. The researchers noticed the school had problems with "opportunity hoarding", where white students were being placed into higher-level classes at higher rates than students of color (Lewis and Diamond 2015). There are a few possible reasons for this given by the authors; 1) Teachers see students of color as less proficient than white students and place them in lower-level classes, 2) Students are originally placed in the same class, and then moved because their parent has the social capital to speak to the teacher and have them moved (Lewis and Diamond 2015).

The second perspective, which is framed within conflict theory, points to a lack of resources and high poverty rates in high POC communities as the cause of high dropout rates among students of color. A clear connection between resources and dropout rates has been established (Wood et al. 2017). One of the authors of this piece, Dr. Stephen Truscott, is quoted as stating:

When you control for the SES of the family, children at the same levels of SES have more or less the same dropout rate for both black and white students. It makes a difference whether you're impoverished or not. Black children are disproportionately

impoverished, so their rate is higher, but it's their SES level that makes a difference, not their race or ethnicity. (Wood et al. 2017)

This perspective is heavily supported by the National School Board Association's research (Jinghong 2020). Forty-five percent of Black students attended high-poverty schools, compared with 8% of white students (Jinghong 2020). Only 7% of Black students attended low-poverty schools compared with 39% of Asian and 31% of white students (Jinghong 2020). Among 90% of Black students without home internet access, 39% said that it was because the internet was too expensive, suggesting that their families could not afford it (Jinghong 2020). Among Black 3 to 18-year-olds, 11% had home internet access only through a smartphone, compared with only 2% among Asians and 3% among white students (Jinghong 2020).

Possible Explanations for Low Retention Rates Among College Students

The issue of low college retention rates among students of color may be an intersectional issue between race and class. A finance article was written by Rachel Bishop and Dr. Alice Anne Bailey in 2019 on the five reasons for low college retention rates. The first reason is, as previously stated, affordability. State spending for higher education is down, cost of higher education is up, so the bills fall to students to pick up. Since the 2008 recession, state spending for higher education has gone down 16%, meaning universities have had to increase the cost of tuition (up 56%). Federal financial aid, like the Pell grant, has not kept up with the increased costs (Bailey and Bishop 2021). Today, the Pell grant only covers 1/3 of costs at a public institution (Bailey and Bishop 2021). Many students will not or cannot take on the loans necessary to continue their education and are forced to drop out (Bailey and Bishop 2021).

The second reason Bailey and Bishop (2021) found for low retention rates of college students was the cost of living. As stated above, large portions of students of color are from high-

poverty areas. Students are having trouble paying for textbooks, food, housing, and a multitude of bills. In a survey of 1,008 students nationwide 70% of students recently surveyed say they're worried about being able to pay their bills on time (Bailey and Bishop 2021). Low-income students were hit especially hard during the pandemic as many students didn't have reliable access to Wi-Fi, making online classes extremely difficult to access. Food and housing insecurity are huge issues on campuses that have drastic impacts on students' abilities to continue their education. Between 14% and 18% of college students surveyed reported they are homeless and 39% are food insecure (Bailey and Bishop 2021). Students facing these challenges are often left without a choice and are forced to leave higher education (Bailey and Bishop 2021).

Another challenge communities of color face in their pursuit of higher education are the need for employment and regular income (HSBC 2018). 85% of students work at least part-time while enrolled in school to help cover expenses (HSBC 2018). Students spend an average of 4 hours a day working, which is two times the amount of time they spend in class and one and a half times the number of hours they spend studying (HSBC 2018). Around 40% of undergraduate students work full time, and around half of the working students are minimum wage workers (HSBC 2018). As a result, their academic performance suffers. Only 22% of low-income students who work while enrolled graduate within 6 years (HSBC 2018).

The fourth factor affecting retention is a lack of academic preparation (Bailey and Bishop 2021). The population consists of students coming from schools that are underfunded, understaffed, and under-resourced. Many students have also been out of academia for many years. Because of this, students often struggle with academics when they enter higher education and have to work much harder to catch up with their peers, a population of historically represented students revered as well prepared and financially equipped to fund their education

(well-prepared, domestic high school graduates under age 25 from families able to support the cost of college) (Bailey and Bishop 2021). Because many non-traditional students are so far behind their traditional peers, they are enrolled in non-credit remedial classes for their first year. This turns a 4-year degree into a 5-year degree, increasing the cost of attending an entire year of tuition, books, housing, and meals, among other aspects of higher education (Bishop and Bailey 2021). Full-time undergrads who take remedial courses are 74% more likely to drop out (Bishop and Bailey 2021).

The fifth factor for low retention rates is a lack of cultural capital, or “college knowledge” (Bailey and Bishop 2021). This lack of knowledge includes struggling with higher education jargon, like FAFSA, and understanding college skills and expectations. Such skills and expectations include navigating office hours, campus guides, campus social norms, college study habits, communicating with professors, how to write an email, asking for letters of recommendation, knowing what to bring to college, asking for extensions/help on assignments, and many others (Bailey and Bishop 2021). Much of this information is either taught to students by their parents or done by their parents almost entirely (as in the case of the FAFSA) (Bailey and Bishop 2021). The article argues that many students of color do not have the cultural capital that is needed to succeed in college (Bailey and Bishop 2021). For example, knowing when dates of course withdrawals dates are, or if it’s appropriate to email their professor for help on an assignment.

The last factor discussed in the article by Bailey and Bishop (2021) was a lack of diversity in faculty in higher education. Students of color are notably impacted by a lack of diversity representation in faculty (Bailey and Bishop 2021). A study conducted on community college students in 2014 found that minority students who had faculty that resembled them and

that they could see as role models was a huge factor in their collegiate success (Fairlie, Hoffmann, and Oreopoulos 2014). The study found that the performance gap between students of different races closed by 20% to 50% when a faculty member of color was teaching (Fairlie, Hoffmann, and Oreopoulos 2014).

DISCUSSION

The cause of high dropout rates among high school students of color seems to be correlated to poverty, a lack of resources in communities of color, high amounts of racial discrimination, bias, and low expectations of students of color by educators. This issue is not an either/or situation. The literature suggests that racial discrimination, bias, and low expectations are big contributing factors to the achievement gap. The literature also suggests that high dropout rates for students of color across class, along with the high portion of students of color living in high poverty areas, means that many students of color also happen to lack the necessary resources to succeed in academics. This means their achievement may suffer and they may be more likely to drop out. Both of these perspectives, racial and financial explanations, may influence the low retention rates among college students of color.

The next step would be to look into ways to alleviate the factors that influence students to drop out and not be retained in academia. The literature notes many possible ways to help lower the dropout rate for students of color in high school, including offering free internet to families, free breakfast, lunch, and snack programs for students, free laundry, housing options for families, access to free tutors, stipends for good grades, and many more options (Sherman and Mitchell 2017).

As for the issue of racial bias among educators, Lewis and Diamond (2015) suggest that such issues need to be solved internally through sensitivity training and making teachers more aware of their own biases. Educators need to be held accountable for their differential treatment of students by race (Lewis and Diamond 2015).

For the lack of affordability when it comes to tuition, many researchers have suggested increasing the maximum Pell grant award to fit the ever-increasing tuition rates. The Pell grant only covering a third of tuition may help a bit, but it still means low-income students have to pay for the majority of the tuition in either loans or scholarships. The idea of having all graduating high school seniors fill out the FAFSA, regardless of their income level, would also be extremely helpful for students. Many students who are eligible for financial aid never apply and thus never claim it (Helkowi 2018). For example, 2.6 billion dollars of financial aid went unclaimed in 2018 (Helkowi 2018).

Another way to help students against the ever-rising cost of tuition could be a tuition cap for public institutions. Many states are proposing bills that would freeze tuition costs, or at least limit the percent increase it's allowed to go up every year. Another possible option that would benefit both students and institutions would be increased state funding for universities, which would take the burden off of students, and would eliminate fears of institutions having to decrease staff or services (Whitford 2021).

The cost of living has been a policy issue on college campuses for years. Many institutions have already worked to create food pantries and temporary housing for students who are in-between homes or lack housing due to school breaks. But even for students who are not in such dire need cost of living is a large problem. The cost of living is very often an issue for students who are unable to work full time to offset the cost of living, or who do work full time,

but are not paid a living wage. Some schools have started looking into policy changes that would make housing on campus more affordable for students, as well as offering well-paying work-study programs that allow students to pay for room and board (Gaffikin, and Morrissey, Wiewel 2019).

Further Research

It is difficult to determine the true variables causing students of color to drop out. The main issue is that many say that when “controlling for other variables” researchers find that high school dropout rates are conclusively caused by either race or class. More research needs to be done on this subject. There has been an almost complete lack of research related to dropout rates among Pacific Islander students and Native American students, despite them having the highest dropout rates of all races. Much of the literature had a very clear black and white dichotomy and does not mention Hispanic, Native American, or Pacific Islanders at all in research. There is a gap in the literature on the connection between the gender, race, and dropout rates despite there being a clear gender/race gap in dropout rates

CONCLUSION

The literature suggests that high school dropout rates are higher for some races than others because of racial bias, or because of high portions of students of color living in high poverty areas. Programs aimed at lowering the achievement gap between students of different classes are offering several programs to help lessen the struggle of low-income students. Schools also need to remain conscious of the role they play in building students’ sense of community and their identities as scholars regardless of the teacher’s biases.

The U.S. higher education system is now faced with challenges that have been increasingly exacerbated by the problems of the last two decades, including the cost of living and tuition going up, high student employment, social capital disparities between backgrounds, and a lack of role models for students of color in higher education. All of these issues contribute to the low retention rates of students of color. Many state legislators and administrators of higher education are suggesting policy changes that could drastically improve the retention rates of students of color: affordable tuition and housing, food pantries on campus, more gainful student employment, programs to help students gain social capital, and hiring more faculty of color. With all of these efforts on both the state and local levels, retention rates of students of color are expected to increase in the coming years.

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