

RE-ENGAGING DISCOURAGED LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM AT WALLA WALLA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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TOPIC:

This report uses a case study of the Alternative Education Program (AEP) at Walla Walla Community College (WWCC) to investigate the circumstances that create discouraged learners and the ways that alternative education programs can best help these students realize academic success. Our research identifies specific areas of improvement for the AEP, as well as recommendations on the community and statewide levels. This research was guided by our community partnership with AEP Instructor Brian Gabbard, and High School Programs Director Kim Cassetto.

METHODS:

In our case study of Latino student experiences from the AEP, we conducted twenty-two interviews and a follow-up focus group of both current and graduated AEP students. We asked students to describe the experiences that brought them to AEP, especially obstacles such as teen parenthood, homelessness, and other factors identified by prior scholarship as barriers to graduation. We also asked for critical feedback on the ways that AEP has mitigated these barriers, and had students identify ways that the program could be improved to better meet their needs. Finally, we documented a thorough description of the program's history, mission, and relationship with the Community College, as well as operational specifics. This report chose to use the term "discouraged learner" in lieu of the common term "at risk," to acknowledge the student as an active agent who has been affected by both internal and external factors.

FINDINGS:

- Barriers such as teen parenthood, sibling parenthood, and homelessness bring with them responsibilities and stressors that limit students' ability to engage in school; all the barriers we investigated were inversely related to socioeconomic status.
- Students labeled and treated as "at risk" feel as though their teachers expect them to fail.
- Students identify AEP's most important characteristics as: Program flexibility, strong student-teacher relationships, and an emphasis on personal responsibility.
- Both AEP's organizational design and dedicated staff allow these program features to flourish.
- The community college environment and AEP's dual enrollment program ease the transition into college.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- AEP should improve student access to post-graduation resources such as scholarship information, job skills training, and life skills workshops
- Alternative schools should create state- and nation-wide information sharing networks to share best practices and foster a strong alternative education community
- Communities should host alternative programs on community college campuses to increase college matriculation rates

- States should alter public school funding protocol to eliminate intra-district competition for student enrollment between mainstream and alternative schools
- States and communities should investigate the best practices for alternative programs through scholarly research and frequent student evaluations.

Full report online at www.walatinos.org / For more information contact B. Zarate: zarateim@whitman.edu