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## Exploring the “At-Risk” Student Label Through the Perspectives of Higher Education Professionals

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### Abstract

Institutions of higher education often use the term “at-risk” to label undergraduate students who have a higher likelihood of not persisting. However, it is not clear how the use of this label impacts the perspectives of the higher education professionals who serve and support these students. Our qualitative study explores the descriptions and understandings of higher education professionals who serve and support at-risk students. We use thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to interpret our data and develop our themes. These themes include conflicting views of the “at-risk” definition, attempts to normalize at-risk, fostering relationships, and “at-promise.”

### Keywords

Labeling Theory, Higher Education, Student Success, At-Risk

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## Exploring the “At-Risk” Student Label Through the Perspectives of Higher Education Professionals

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*Institutions of higher education often use the term “at-risk” to label undergraduate students who have a higher likelihood of not persisting. However, it is not clear how the use of this label impacts the perspectives of the higher education professionals who serve and support these students. Our qualitative study explores the descriptions and understandings of higher education professionals who serve and support at-risk students. We use thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to interpret our data and develop our themes. These themes include conflicting views of the “at-risk” definition, attempts to normalize at-risk, fostering relationships, and “at-promise.”*

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The term “at-risk” is one way in which some higher education professionals label undergraduate students who have a higher likelihood of not persisting in postsecondary education and completing their educational objectives. In the context of higher education in the U.S., the term at-risk is often attached to the individual student and is shorthand for perceived deficiencies related to students’ academic readiness for college. Academic readiness is frequently measured by a combination of several factors such as SAT or ACT scores, demographic statuses, and cultural norms (Choy, 2002; Kuh et al., 2008; Olbrecht et al., 2016; Raju & Schumacker, 2015; Yeh, 2002).

Without social context, labels such as at-risk are neither inherently positive nor negative. However, because language is socially constructed, it always has a meaning even if it is not mutually agreed upon by those who use it (Svalberg, 2009). Labels used to describe individuals or groups may result in different treatment from those to whom the label is not applied (Drotos & Cilesiz, 2016; Hernandez, 2011). When used in the context of higher education, the at-risk label implies a student or group of students does not fit a normative profile (hooks, 1989; Schwalbe et al., 2000; VanderPyl, 2015). As observed by others, the impact the at-risk label may have on students ranges from minimal to developmentally crippling (Brooks, 2003; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Gregory, 2007; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015).

Over the past 15 years, providing access to higher education for traditionally at-risk students has become a focus of the undergraduate student recruitment process. However, efforts to promote the retention of at-risk students lags behind student recruitment (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2018). This leads to students being admitted, but feeling unsupported by the institution (Dervin, 2012; Fine, 1994). The use of the at-risk label is an issue because of the personal impact on students who begin their post-secondary career with the at-risk deficit label attached to them. Support for at-risk students often is the work of higher education professionals who navigate the use of the at-risk label and their own beliefs about its application. A better understanding of this relationship is critical to supporting higher education professionals and their ability to support students.

Our interpretivist (Elliot et al., 2016) study is an exploration of data collected through interviews with eight higher education professionals who work directly with at-risk students. Our study problematizes the at-risk label and suggests approaches for the development of strategies designed to improve at-risk student retention and degree completion rates. We collected data for our study at Rocky Mountain University (RMU), a doctoral degree-granting institution in the Rocky Mountain West. We identified study participants using convenience sampling (Rivera, 2019). We employed labeling theory (Becker, 1963) as a framework for crafting interview questions, data analysis, and discussing our findings to understand the influences of ascribing negative qualities to people, either by authorities, social groups, or the individual. We collected data through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30-60 minutes and used thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to help us understand the data. The guiding question of our study is how do higher education professionals understand and navigate the at-risk label? By answering this question, we can provide additional understanding about how professionals who support students navigate a label with negative connotations.

### **Literature Review**

Obtaining a college education is important both economically and socially. In addition to higher earnings, a college degree reduces the chances an individual becomes unemployed, increases community involvement, and reduces criminal activity (Ma et al., 2016; Singell & Waddell, 2010). As the public demands that institutions of higher education become more accessible (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2018), it has become increasingly apparent that attrition among students labeled at-risk is detrimental to the individual, higher education institutions, and society.

At-risk is an operational term used by institutions of higher education to identify students who likely need academic remediation, social intervention, or both to succeed in postsecondary education (Deil-Amen, 2011). However, there is limited literature that indicates how higher education professionals and faculty members describe and use the term at-risk when referring to students identified by their institution as such. Literature (e.g., Adelman, 2006; Castro, 2014; Valencia, 2010) suggests the at-risk label implies a deficiency in the preparedness of students and is often a product of cultural and socioeconomic factors beyond students' control. Our study addresses gaps in the literature by describing the understandings of higher education professionals who use the operational term at-risk and their reflections on their responsibility to neutralize the effects of deficit language when supporting students.

### **At-Risk Label in Institutional Contexts**

While the at-risk label is ubiquitous, there is no consensus on its definition. Each institution may establish different criteria for what qualifies a student as at-risk and develop different approaches in predicting students' likelihood of attrition. In some instances, departments within the same institution may use different criteria to define at-risk. However, institutions generally characterize at-risk students as those whose academic backgrounds (e.g., postsecondary preparation), prior academic performance (e.g., high school or first-semester college GPA), or personal characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, cultural background, first-generation college student status) are associated with lower college persistence rates (Adelman, 2006; Castro, 2014; Choy, 2002; Deil-Amen, 2011; Valencia, 2010; Yeh, 2002). Because institutions often do not have the resources to assess the ability of each student to persist to degree completion, individual students may be classified as at-risk based on academic scores, demographic statuses, or a combination of several factors (Choy, 2002; Kuh et al., 2008; Olbrecht et al., 2016; Raju & Schumacker, 2015; Yeh, 2002). However,

a gap persists in understanding how higher education professionals navigate the use of the term at-risk.

### **Strengths-Based Approach to Student Success**

There has been a movement to replace the more common term at-risk with “at-promise” to change how educators refer to students facing economic or social challenges (Cheney & Jewell, 2012; Sachar et al., 2019; Whiting, 2006). “There are numerous federal funding streams, conferences, training programs, and educational technology companies dedicated to identifying and supporting students deemed statistically most likely to struggle” (McKenzie, 2019, para. 5) and possibly not complete their educational objectives. Some educators argue that these efforts, though well-intentioned and intended to help students, can have a negative impact because of their deficit-based approach. Thus, the term “at-promise” reframes this phrase to recognize the potential inherent in all college students.

### **Labeling Theory**

Central to our study is understanding how individuals who work with college students understand the at-risk label. Applying this label to students based on predetermined criteria is consistent with the definition of labeling (Becker, 1963) to explain social deviance. Labeling theory posits that social groups and institutions develop rules about negative characteristics that some individuals possess and therefore become stigmatized (Goffman, 1963). Labeling individuals based on perceived negative characteristics and behavior helps construct a social reality that may not have existed before, but now exists and has consequences (Falk, 2001). Becker (1963) more fully developed labeling theory by focusing on the role that “othering” plays in the establishment of deviance.

In the context of higher education, the student characteristics associated with at-risk status deviate from the characteristics of the general undergraduate student population. Importantly, higher education professionals may not perceive individual students or student groups to be deviants in a pejorative sense. Instead, the at-risk label is often used to identify individuals who may be academically successful if they are properly supported. Nevertheless, the use of the term at-risk persists despite its negative associations due to its institutionalization within the field of higher education.

Recent work on labeling theory considers efforts of re-labeling as an institutional process whereby social status can be re-conferred to counter historical trends of educational sorting and inequity (Achinstein et al., 2015). In other words, using labels to reframe deficit language may create positive attributes where they did not exist previously. It is noted that even well-intended efforts to shape policies, practices, and norms can result in a reduced sense of belonging for at-risk students (Achinstein et al., 2015). For example, programs designed to support at-risk college students may serve a counter purpose by further perpetuating the negative associations inherent in the at-risk label.

Previous studies found that higher education institutions and professionals who use the term at-risk create a student label derived from the cultural background of the student to whom the label is applied (Castro, 2014; Valencia, 2010). Studies examining the student experience tend to use an etic approach (Burtaverde et al., 2018; Headland et al., 1990) to generalize at-risk terminology to inform students and readers who may not regularly work with at-risk students. Regardless of the terminology used to define at-risk college students, a common theme in the literature is that institutions are best positioned to support the success of at-risk students by building an environment with resources and degree plans that capitalize on the

strengths incoming students currently possess while developing students' capabilities through their academic program of study.

## Methods

We used a qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2018; Denzin, 2019) to create an interpretation of the descriptions and understandings of our participants who navigate the at-risk label due to the nature of their work. Our approach to data collection and analysis was informed by labeling theory (Achinstein et al., 2015; Becker, 1963) and our belief that knowledge is a construction of the views, differences, and similarities of a common experience (Driscoll, 2005). Our approach was also shaped by our positionality as highly privileged individuals who work in academia as full-time staff and faculty members. We are all white, heterosexual, cis-gendered males holding at least a graduate degree.

We used semi-structured interviews as our data collection method as they are ideal tools for collecting the type of data needed to answer our research question (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Holmqvist & Frisé, 2012; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Marvasti & Trevino, 2019). Our semi-structured interviews were designed with open-ended questions to encourage discussion intended to elicit participants' descriptions and understandings (Braun & Clark, 2006). Our approach to coding included organizing the data collected through participant interviews, identifying common language to create codes, and noting areas of importance in each transcript. Themes emerged from the interview transcripts and allowed us to present participants' perspectives in a transferrable language to other higher education professionals.

### Participant Recruitment

To ensure our participants had familiarity with the at-risk label at RMU and how it is applied to students, we developed the following inclusion criteria. Participants needed to

1. be a full-time employee (staff, administration, or faculty) at RMU,
2. work directly with at-risk students at RMU in the capacity of advising, teaching, or both, and
3. be able to articulate an individual definition of at-risk students

After receiving institutional review board approval, we recruited prospective participants by asking faculty and staff members we believed met the criteria to participate. We identified 10 faculty and 10 staff members who met the criteria. During the outreach process we explained our study and eight individuals articulated an individual definition of at-risk and agreed to participate in the study. Of these, six work as administrators and two as faculty members. At the time of data collection each of the researchers was affiliated with RMU as employees and each participant was known to the researchers. Demographic information on the participants was not collected for this study because we worried participants might believe we would use factors such as race, ethnicity, or gender as elements of our analysis.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

Given the limited knowledge about how higher education professionals view the at-risk label, we chose to conduct semi-structured interviews to capture the descriptions and understandings of our study participants (Smith & Osborn, 2003). We developed semi-structured interview questions to explore the descriptions and understandings of our participants and provide the relevant context to the higher education practitioner and scholarly

audience we sought (Patton, 2014; Seidman, 1998; Weiss, 1994). We met together to prepare open-ended questions that we believed would elicit responses from our participants. The development of these questions was informed by the literature and our professional experiences. We asked guiding questions such as, “how do you define at-risk students given your role at RMU?” As is consistent with the benefits of semi-structured interview methods, we embraced the fluidity and direction of the questions in each of the individual interviews (Patton, 2014; Seidman, 1998; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Weiss, 1994).

The interviews were conducted by Dix and Lail in 2016 on campus in a private location agreed to by the participants. Interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and the length corresponded with participants’ depth of experience working with at-risk students. To capture participant responses, all interviews were recorded electronically. Upon the conclusion of each interview, the researcher who conducted the interviews transcribed the recording verbatim.

Once participants provided informed consent, we began interviews with questions about the nature of their work with at-risk students to help ensure participants understood the focus of our research topic. Next, we asked participants to describe their understanding of the at-risk label. We then asked participants to share how their description aligned with their experiences supporting the students they serve.

We asked follow-up questions during the interviews to ensure the clarity and consistency of responses. This included asking participants to clarify their understanding of socially, emotionally, or psychologically at-risk students to enhance the richness of participants’ descriptions. For example, we asked participants to explain how a low-income, first generation student with an institutionally acceptable entrance high school GPA and average ACT/SAT scores could be considered at-risk.

## **Analysis**

We initially exchanged recordings and transcriptions between ourselves for review to ensure accuracy. Specifically, we discussed how labeling theory might appear in the transcripts and developed preliminary codes to highlight these instances. For example, the literature on re-labeling suggested we be sensitive to participants’ attempts to reframe existing labels with negative connotations. Numerous meetings were held in our offices to discuss our interpretations of the preliminary codes to eliminate confusion and redundancy. For example, we initially developed a code for our participants’ life experiences. After discussion, we realized our participants shared these experiences specifically to normalize at-risk, which required we create a new code. We engaged in discussions until we agreed upon the definition and scope of our codes. We held subsequent meetings in our offices to code the transcripts together, which helped to ensure consistency. During these meetings, we also created notations of shared student success knowledge and language used among the participants (Adair & Pastori, 2010; Burtaverde et al., 2018; Headland et al., 1990).

Next, we grouped codes that had similar content and meaning into categories. For example, each of our participants expressed opinions about the at-risk label and it was apparent each had reflected on the phrase but had sometimes reached different conclusions. We categorized these individual descriptions of the at-risk label as “At-Risk Meaning” and grouped them together for further discussion. We then analyzed the categorized data using a thematic approach (Braun & Clark, 2006). This involved us discussing each of the categories created when we grouped data by our codes.

From this, we identified eight potential categories that we compared to the data to ensure relevancy. For example, we developed categories for “developing social capital” and “fostering relationships.” However, after reviewing the transcripts, we determined that the “developing social capital” category was redundant and the “fostering relationships” category

was more accurate. Based on this approach, we rejected four categories for redundancy. Ultimately, we believed the four remaining categories reflected common ideas among our participants and were meaningful to our research question. These four categories became our themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness requires researchers to demonstrate credibility, transferability, affirmability, and dependability (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Morrow, 2005). We interviewed participants and discussed our transcriptions until we agreed we were no longer collecting new information. We believe our study will be meaningful and believable to higher education practitioners working with at-risk student populations. Throughout our manuscript, we have documented our process of inquiry and the methods we used to collect and analyze data. Finally, we limited our findings to the data we collected and our analysis.

### **Limitations**

All studies have limitations that should be identified by the researchers. Our study was conducted at a single institution with its own unique characteristics and organizational culture. Both likely shaped our participants' descriptions and understandings of the at-risk label. Caution should be taken when generalizing our findings to other settings. In addition, our participants were recruited through convenience sampling which limited the participation to individuals with whom we had established relationships. Because of this, we may not have captured the full range of perspectives of those who work with at-risk students at RMU. Finally, our visible identities likely shaped our participants' responses to our interview questions.

## **Findings**

Through our thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the descriptions and understandings of the higher education professionals we interviewed, we found that while RMU uses the at-risk label, the institution has no shared definition of at-risk students or criteria used to identify them. Our participants, who we gave pseudonyms, did share concerns regarding the use of the at-risk label and the pervasive negative consequences it may have on students. Our themes include conflicting views of the at-risk definition, attempts to normalize at-risk, fostering relationships, and "at-promise" (the belief in the ability of all college students to be academically successful).

### **Conflicting Views of the At-Risk Definition**

Each of our participants held their own operating definitions of at-risk, which were broad and varied. Some of our participants defined at-risk using academic performance-based indicators. Sarah, a professional advisor who works with students who have not yet declared an academic major or who have a cumulative undergraduate GPA below 2.0, observed:

Both populations are students that are considered to be "at-risk" at [RMU]. In various circles around the United States they would agree that they are "at-risk" because either they don't know what they want to do or they're having some academic difficulty.



For Sarah, RMU's use of the at-risk label is predictive of attrition and academic performance, and therefore has operational value. Similarly, Rebecca, a success coach, referenced academic indicators of at-risk by stating that 1<sup>st</sup>-year students enroll with a given index score, a measure of their GPA and college entrance exams. Based on Rebecca's experience, these are key criteria used by RMU to identify at-risk students, yet they indicated that other factors impact student persistence. Rebecca stated, "regardless of those index scores low to high, we get close to 50% of our freshman class that are either gone or on academic probation by the second semester."

Lindsey, a faculty member, instead focused on student motivation and associated behaviors to define at-risk. They explained that a lack of academic effort defined at-risk students because "someone that's 'at-risk' chooses to not come — or for some reason is not coming to class and isn't participating or reaching out." For Lindsey, the at-risk label warns the institution that a student is not demonstrating behaviors associated with academic success. Lindsey defines at-risk to describe perceived issues of motivation based on observable behavior, such as class attendance. This approach does not account for other explanations and circumstances for student behaviors. For example, students with family or work obligations may have conflicting priorities and appear less academically engaged.

Other participants focused on broad demographic indicators. According to Steven, a senior administrator, "there are obviously risk factors when students are entering college. You know, 1<sup>st</sup>-generation students — their background, their economic status." As someone responsible for monitoring institutional retention rates, Steven understands the at-risk label is important to identify students who may need additional support, but also finds the term problematic:

I think, throughout my time here [at RMU], we've used many different ways to describe these students. I mean it's tough. Technically, "at-risk"— I just hate that term. I personally don't use it. I really just don't even call my students anything, you know? Because calling them "at-risk" is already giving them that 10 steps behind this other student that's not "at-risk." It's basically saying, you're already behind, and I don't ever want to say that.

Steven is aware that the label has important functions that assist the institution to identify students who may need more support. It also could impact students' self-concept and sense of belonging as a member of the campus community.

At least two participants found it helpful to discuss the criteria often used to define at-risk. Rachel, a financial aid counselor, expressed a more specific and comprehensive definition. Rachel stated:

I often include, as does the University, at-risk in terms of financially at-risk, or socially, emotionally, psychologically at-risk. I guess I would add to that also, students from historically underrepresented populations. So that might be religious, sexual, racial minorities.

Rachel's definition recognizes that numerous factors, often outside the control of students, contribute to their understanding of at-risk. David, a program director who works with underserved student populations, referenced racial, economic, psychographic, and cultural background indicators throughout the interview. David recognizes that the gaps in standard institutional definitions frequently fail to include factors beyond those easily measurable by course grades and student demographics.

Four participants expressed noteworthy aversion to the term at-risk, acknowledging the potential negative consequences of its use. They specifically indicated that the negative

associations with the label were detrimental to student success. For example, Steven stated, “the ‘at-risk’ term, we don’t really like to use, because it just seems — it’s almost a negative connotation when you’re referring to a student.” David went even further, stating,

It is a stigma, and a label that I think has plagued students who may be perceived as not being fully ready for college . . . they potentially could have a downfall. I know what that does to a person's psyche and their belief about themselves, their self-efficacy.

Steven and David understand how the at-risk label impacts students’ self-concept and how others might perceive them. David’s perception is consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Komarraju & Nadler, 2013) that have established academic self-efficacy as a significant predictor of academic achievement in college.

Sarah refrained from allowing students hear her refer to them as at-risk. Sarah stated, “we don’t call them ‘at-risk’ when they are in here working with us. But they are considered to be ‘at-risk’ by the institution.” This suggests Sarah is aware of the impact of the at-risk label, and therefore refrains from its use in the presence of students. Additionally, Rachel expressed the potential harm inherent in the use of the at-risk label. Rachel stated,

I think the problem that I have is that the label “at-risk” is such a heavy label . . . I think the danger is when we classify, we begin to see them as a model of the category. Well, all these “at-risk” students need coaching in academics and coaching in work-life balance.

Our participants actively and consciously modified the language they used in recognition that the at-risk label is rooted in deficit language and has the potential of being received negatively by students. Judy, a director responsible for monitoring students’ academic experience, believed all students experience information overload during new student orientation, but those labeled at-risk might believe that other students are better absorbing this new information. This belief, coupled with the use of the at-risk label may instill greater doubt in students about their academic capabilities, leading to a lack of confidence and academic self-efficacy.

### **Attempts to Normalize At-Risk**

A second theme emerged from the data that found participants actively worked to normalize the at-risk label for students who might fit their definition. Even participants who had concerns with the at-risk label believed it was important to make attempts to remove its stigma. This was often accomplished by sharing their own experiences, even if their own experiences did not match those of a particular student. Five participants shared that when supporting at-risk students, they attempted to relate to them in this way. For example, Rachel shared:

One of the best things I can do for my students is talk to them about my learning disability and say, “You know I’ve struggled for years.” Being able to say that to students, “You’re going to find things in your own path that are easy, there’s stuff within financial aid counseling that is like my second language, but then there is other stuff that I have to work damn hard at.”

Rachel attempted to normalize at-risk by sharing personal experiences with a learning disability to relate to students and remove barriers to having difficult discussions about personal budgeting and debt. Rachel did not share whether this approach worked well when working with students with learning disabilities, marginalized identities, or both. We do wonder if Rachel might also attempt to normalize the at-risk label by sharing additional experiences as they relate to other elements of their individual identities but did not feel comfortable sharing them with White, male researchers.

David, who identified as a former at-risk student, suggested it was important to relate to at-risk students:

There's this cultural competency of understanding how to talk to a student who may question going to college or who may not think that they have the ability to go to college. We have counselors who say, "let me tell you my story." I think there's a piece to this that is important. That is making sure that not only can a counselor tell a story, and then when students arrive on that campus, they feel it. They feel that there is support, that there are people like [Steven] and [Elizabeth] and [David], and others who identify as that first-generation student, and perhaps were at-risk students. Identified as at-risk could just be that we were Latinos or Latinas, or that I grew up in [a disadvantaged area].

This quote illustrates how our participants intuitively understand labeling theory. That is, the meaning associated with the label and who is applying it shapes how it will be experienced by those to whom it is applied.

Like the students they serve, several participants expressed self-identities of at-risk when reflecting on their own college experiences. By doing so, these participants actively demonstrated a shared perception and commonalities with the students they serve. Through this self-identification, participants intended to destigmatize the label and promote students' feeling of belongingness by highlighting shared experiences between the student and those within the academy. For example, Steven shared:

That's a big part of the program we do because our staff members have been through it; they've made it through. My favorite student is the one that isn't the straight-A student; it's the one that really struggled, maybe fell to academic probation, but really worked their butt off to get through it ... you experience failure, and if you have that willpower and that drive to overcome that stuff, man, you're the best teacher because you've experienced it.

Steven takes pride in having staff who have had their own experiences with being labeled at-risk and who can now relate to students who struggle academically or experience other challenges. Importantly, Steven considers this during the hiring and training of new staff.

### **Fostering Relationships**

Our third theme relates to our participants' awareness that relationships are vital to student success and the development of social capital. Although our participants did not provide a definition of social capital, they associated it with students' relationships on campus. With this understanding, our participants shared examples about how they encourage students to expand their existing social capital, especially their relationships. For example, Steven described helping students maintain their relationships through student support programs like study nights and social events:

Even if you have friends, you rarely see them until the end of the night, unless they're not even in your same hall. Then you may never see them. So that's tough. So, getting them together and seeing a familiar face and just being around someone that has commonalities helps a lot. That's kind of what we're trying to build.

Steven is aware that students have many obligations which may keep them from spending time with peers who serve as their social support.

Judy expressed that:

The challenge is every person has a different story. So, the assumption is that these students know where to go for resources. We assume they are going to go to the website, they are going to ask questions, and they are going to have the confidence to open a door and actually ask someone for help. If I'm struggling, how do I tell someone that?

David used the term "social capital" specifically when referring to an academic-based program that supports underserved student populations by fostering social relationships:

When at-risk students are here, they may not always have the social capital and the social capital is built through the program. We also have an onboarding program in the residence halls that focuses on students' social and academic integration in their own living environment.

David recognizes that at-risk students may not understand the importance of developing relationships with peers who may also be transitioning to campus life. Rebecca explained attempts to build social capital through academic achievement:

To make a direct connection between what their academic experience is and some of the social pieces. What we did this last fall was highlight the students' academic achievement in a different environment, in a different context. So we had all the research displayed in the dorms. People could say 'oh, yeah that was mine' and their friends could look at it. But it was highlighting the academic piece in a social setting.

Rebecca understands that a connection between academic achievement and relationships exists and helps to promote social capital. Adding social capital through relationships and academic achievement helps to eliminate the negative barriers of the at-risk label.

### **At-Promise: The Belief in the Ability of All College Students to be Academically Successful**

The fourth theme to emerge from our data analysis was a deeply held belief in the ability of every college student to be academically successful. Steven objected to the term at-risk, identified a preference for the term "at-promise," and expanded on the importance of being labeled at-promise instead of at-risk:

I do not use that label. I prefer to refer to students as "at-promise," the reason being, at-risk is a stigma and a label that I think has plagued students who may not be perceived as fully ready for college. I would say I was identified as one

of those students when I was graduating from high school. We believe all students have the ability to graduate because there are so many variables, it's the student, it's the school system, it's the policies in place. It's a systemic issue. [Students] possess a lot of non-cognitive variables such as resilience, motivation, leadership skills, and all these other things, but traditional measurements may say they are at-risk.

Steven's quote captures the possible harm caused by using the at-risk label and the ways it fails to account for difficult to measure non-cognitive variables. Referring to students as "diamonds in the rough" underscores Steven's belief that many students need positive support to fulfill their potential. Based on Steven's operational definition, at-risk extends beyond traditional measures to support students psychologically and develops systemic approaches that promote student success. All eight of our participants discussed having the belief that all college students are capable of success. Rebecca stated,

I believe students can learn the skills needed to succeed. Some people will learn them more quickly than others. Some get the wake-up call early and they find out what they need to do. They are able to transition pretty quickly. Whereas others might take longer. I think they all can succeed.

When talking about students who have been identified as at-risk of dismissal due to poor academic performance, Rebecca said:

Now they're here. They need that message of, "This is not wasted effort. You might have to take a little longer route to ultimately achieve your goals, but it can still be done." That's still the message, "it still can be done."

Lindsey stated, "I think they're all capable of passing and being successful, every single one of them." Because our participants believe that all students can be successful, they questioned the need for the at-risk label. As expressed by David, "This gives students the sense that they belong and that I will not define them by any assigned label." Participants unanimously believed the optimal time to intervene with at-risk students is immediately upon their matriculation. Additionally, the intervention should be as accessible to students as possible, even to the point of being "intrusive." If support and resources are immediate and readily available, participants believed students are more likely to acquire the skills needed to overcome whatever pre-college criteria led to their identification as at-risk.

## **Discussion**

Our findings suggest that while RMU uses the at-risk label, its meaning is socially constructed by the individuals who use it. Variations in its meaning as expressed by our participants arise out of their individual experiences and beliefs about student success. As observed in our themes, participants understand that many students need support in order to succeed academically but they recognize the potential implications of using a label with negative connotations.

### **Inconsistent Meaning**

Our participants provided varying definitions and meanings of the at-risk label, and its potential harm. Notably, each participant assigned personal meaning when discussing the at-

risk label. The variations of meaning appear to be influenced by how each participant interacts with the at-risk population and the student subgroups of which it is composed. A significant issue with how the label is applied at RMU is that it has no institutionally ascribed meaning. Therefore, the label is not applied consistently and its meaning is ambiguous. A possible problem with this approach is that misalignment may exist between resource allocations, the support students receive, and who is labeled at-risk. Further, because the at-risk label is being assigned at the program level, professionals may feel that the label is applied arbitrarily when students engage in different support programs.

The inconsistencies of meaning raise concerns about the harm associated with deficit language because it attaches a stigma to individuals who others may not believe are at-risk. This may create tension between professionals with different beliefs about which students need support, or which students have a high probability of succeeding academically. A possible result is that there is not a consistent and efficient way for RMU to identify which students are truly at-risk, and how to support them.

### **When Normalizing is Inappropriate or Fails**

Several of our participants discussed normalizing at-risk by sharing their personal experiences with students labeled at-risk. Normalizing requires understanding the saliency of experiences and identities the student holds to make an effective and authentic connection. Normalizing is a powerful approach to destigmatize at-risk labels, especially if it is congruent with the experiences of students and deemed authentic. As institutions of higher education continue to expand enrollments to admit students who meet definitions of at-risk, there will be an increased need to hire professionals with first-hand experience working with diverse student populations.

When considering our participants' attempts to normalize at-risk, it is important for us to acknowledge our approach to data collection and visible identities as researchers. We suspect that researchers with other visible identities may have elicited different responses from our participants. For example, we did not hear stories about participants' failures to normalize a student's characteristic that made them "at-risk." Also, we did not hear stories by our participants who believed they would be unable to normalize these same characteristics. We believe this is reason for concern as some well-intended student support professionals may create further harm in their attempts to normalize an at-risk characteristic. The role that our visible identities may have in data collection was not considered when we designed the study, a significant oversight on our part. Hopefully, future researchers can learn from this shortcoming.

### **At-Promise: The Belief in the Ability of All College Students to be Academically Successful**

Some participants were uncomfortable using the at-risk label in the context of their work and mentioned avoiding the term to describe students. Steven recommended reframing the label to at-promise to remove negative stigma. David and Sarah also mentioned the term at-promise to destigmatize students who need academic, social, psychological, or other forms of support.

Becker (1963), Goffman (1963), and others observe the power of labeling and its effectiveness for identifying those who violate institutional norms. For institutions and professionals working to mitigate social inequities, the at-risk label needs to be reconsidered. This means identifying new labels with fewer associations with deficit characteristics and rethinking the labels commonly used in higher education.

Labels have the power to evoke deficit thinking and responses. Similarly, labels may have the power to inspire and reshape self-concept. The use of the at-risk label seeks to confirm an asset-based approach and expresses a belief in the potential of each student to succeed. In using this term, we believe our participants intuitively understand that the at-risk label might result in more students meeting institutional norms and labeling students in ways that capitalize on their prior experiences as assets.

### Conclusion

Enrollment pressures at many higher education institutions may result in an increase in the number of students who meet an institutional definition of at-risk. Like our participants, we know that some students with particular characteristics are more likely to persist than their peers. Based on our findings, we recommend institutions consider whether the at-risk label is beneficial to students or if it is merely a convenient sorting method. Our participants were aware of the potentially harmful effects of the label but appeared to understand that the institution requires criteria for identifying students with greater probability of attrition as compared to their peers. We observed repeated expressions of how the at-risk label can shape a student's belief in their ability to persist to graduation.

As we reflected on the research process and participant responses, we found ourselves impressed by the level of commitment our participants demonstrated to serving at-risk students. Our participants had obviously given considerable thought to the at-risk label and the ways it may shape students' experiences. We were surprised that at least one of our participants still adopted "a-pull-yourself-up-by-your-by-your-bootstraps" mentality. As our other participants recognized, this approach is detrimental to student success.

### Implications

The phenomenon this study describes has relevance and importance that extends beyond the participating institution as the at-risk label is widely used across the field of higher education. As we have demonstrated, the perspectives of higher education professionals who work with at-risk students needs further exploration to understand how their experiences could improve student outcomes. The findings of this study offer insight as to the inconsistent definition and application of the at-risk label, and the potential harm caused by using a label rooted in deficit language. To better support all student populations, higher education professionals should pay attention to what is happening on their campuses and the language used to label students.

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