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PREVIEW

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**Administrative support and awareness of vocational programs in
alternative secondary education institutions**

Nizzi, Patrick Joseph, Ed.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1994

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PREVIEW

**ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
AND AWARENESS OF VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN ALTERNATIVE
SECONDARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

by

Patrick J. Nizzi

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

**Major: Interdepartmental Area of
Community and Human Resources**

Under the Supervision of Professor Niel A. Edmunds

Lincoln, Nebraska

August 1994

DISSERTATION TITLE

Administrative Support and Awareness of Vocational Programs in

Alternative Secondary Education Institutions

BY

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**ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
AND AWARENESS OF VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN ALTERNATIVE
SECONDARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

Patrick J. Nizzi, Ed. D

University of Nebraska, 1994

Advisor: Niel Edmunds

Administrative support has often been reported to be the key element contributing to a program's success or failure within a school system (Berman & McLaughlin, 1987; Mann, 1978). The same has been reported to be true regarding vocational programs (Edmunds, 1969; Edmunds, 1982; National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education, 1984).

The purpose for conducting this study was to provide a better understanding of the relationship between administrative awareness and the support of vocational education programs through applied mechanisms of administrative skills, in alternative secondary schools.

The population for this research study was all alternative high school administrators registered with the Project on Alternatives in Education at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. The registry provided the only national listing of alternative secondary schools, originally developed by researchers at Indiana University-Bloomington (Young, 1990).

A two-section survey instrument was used to gather data relating to administrators' levels of awareness of the benefits of vocational programs and levels of support for those programs within alternative secondary schools. With a return rate of 46 percent, comparisons of administrative levels of support for vocational education programs was examined.

Responding administrators were determined to be either "High" or "Low" in relation to their awareness of the benefits of vocational programs. Support level means were calculated for both the "High" awareness group and the "Low" awareness group. A two-tailed test of significant difference (t-test) was computed and a significant difference was found to exist between the two groups' responses. Administrators in the high awareness group supported vocational education programs within their schools (through the application of administrative skills) at a significantly greater level than did those administrators in the low awareness group.

To investigate the relationship between administrative skill application toward vocational programs (support) and the awareness of vocational program benefits, the Pearson Product Moment Coefficient measurement was employed. The relationship index was found to be $r=.6715$, indicating a moderate relationship between awareness of program benefits and the application of administrative skills.

A DEDICATION

**To all of those who caringly supported me through the process,
especially to Andrea, my loving wife.**

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Problem

Vocational education programs and course offerings in secondary education have grown in importance as business and industry leaders have decried the current lack of a prepared workforce (Miller, Edmunds, & Mahler, 1992). Students are reported to lack reading, writing, and mathematics skills, positive attitudes toward work, and appropriate job behavior indicators (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990). Additionally, the Committee for Economic Development (1985) reported that many high school graduates are unemployable as they lack the abilities to solve problems, make decisions, set priorities, and learn independently. The shortage of a prepared workforce is so severe that billions of dollars are spent each year in U.S. industry to remediate work skill deficits of employees (Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991; Boyer, 1985).

Preparing students to be contributing members of society has been a longstanding goal of the public educational system in the United States (Tyack, 1974). Vocational education programs have

traditionally carried the specific responsibility of preparing students to enter occupations that have required less than a baccalaureate degree (Evans & Herr, 1978). In addition to providing general training for current and future workforce needs, vocational education provides a mechanism for secondary schools to positively influence at-risk students (Phelps & Lutz, 1977; National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education, 1984; Phelps & Cole, 1988). Strong (1990) reported that the nation's economic welfare in the future will be dependent upon securing fuller workforce participation from a larger segment of the general population, specifically including at-risk student groups with whom national public educational systems have experienced only limited success. Sarkees-Wircenski and Izzo (1991) reported that at-risk youth are a national resource that must be developed through vocational education programs to fill the expected 21 million new jobs by the year 2000.

The concept of providing vocational training for at-risk youth is not new (Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987; Hayward, Adelman, & Apling, 1988), as educators have consistently reported that many of these students require a more hands-on or concrete approach to learning (Meers, 1993). At-risk student populations who have proven to be incompatible with the traditional systems of schooling have, as a consequence of their unique educational needs being

unmet, acquired a “failure identity” (Glasser, 1965; 1969). Their pathway to educational success may be realized in an alternative school environment that is specifically designed to meet the unique needs of at-risk learners (Glasser, 1990).

The alternative secondary school environment allows for independent student needs to be met through individualized instructional strategies and personal approaches to social skill development (Cuban, 1989). In addition, Weber and Puleo (1988) reported that strong vocational emphasis with applied academics and a focused learning component outside of the classroom are effective in retaining or recapturing the interest of at-risk students.

Gottfredson (1987), Wehlage, (1989), and Young (1990) reported that there are a variety of alternative secondary school models ranging from prevention programs that provide services to at-risk youth outside of the regular school environments to in-school interventions that target at-risk students to receive special services. Models also include primary prevention efforts that significantly alter school environments and climates to facilitate the special learning needs of at-risk students. Gottfredson (1987) and Young (1990) reported that services within the different alternative secondary learning environments vary; included are services that are purely educational in the form of academic interventions, services

that are affective in nature such as student counseling and guidance departments, and services that are work related such as job-skills training and job placement assistance.

Gottfredson (1987) stated that:

Alternative schools vary in their nature, student composition, structure, and purpose. There is not yet a cumulative body of scientific evidence about their effects. Because school systems often feel compelled to provide such alternatives for unruly adolescents, the development of such knowledge is important. School systems implementing such programs have an ethical obligation to assess the efficacy and potential unintended consequences of their alternative schools (p. 53).

In response to Gottfredson's and others' research that has encouraged an in-depth investigation of alternative schools, this study was designed to provide a pragmatic body of data for researchers and practitioners in the field concerning levels of administrative awareness of the benefits of vocational education programs, and their corresponding levels of support for vocational education programs that exist within alternative secondary schools.

Statement of the Purpose

The existence of vocational programming in alternative secondary schools has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the level of internal administrative support for these programs in the schools. Despite this deficiency, the need for the instruction and education of at-risk youth has continued to be

seen as vital and paramount to educational reform (Rojewski & Meers, 1990). This investigation has contributed to filling a void that existed in the scholarly and professional literature relating to secondary alternative schools in this regard.

Weldy (1979) reported that the majority of school principals come from teaching backgrounds that are non-vocationally oriented, and that it is impossible for administrators to be “experts” in relating to all curricula. Subsequently, it is possible that secondary alternative school administrators may not fully understand the benefits of vocational programs within their schools.

The purpose for conducting this study was to provide a better understanding of the relationship between administrative awareness and the support of vocational education programs through applied mechanisms of administrative skills in alternative secondary schools. In pursuit of this purpose, administrative awareness of vocational programs was identified and related to the level of support for vocational programs. Both awareness and support were operationally defined to more fully embody the exploratory nature of the investigation. The sample of alternative secondary school administrators was taken from the national registry of alternative secondary schools, which has occasionally published a National Register of Alternative Schools. The sample incorporated the use of a

stratified random sample.

Research Questions

For the purposes of the current study, the following research questions were employed to collect and analyze data:

- 1) How aware were alternative secondary school administrators of the socio-economic, student educational, and student personal benefits of vocational education?
- 2) What were the perceived levels of support through select administrative mechanisms or skills for vocational programs in alternative secondary schools?
- 3) Was there a significant difference between the support levels of administrators who reported a high degree of awareness of the benefits of vocational education programs and administrators who reported a low degree of awareness of the benefits of vocational education programs?
- 4) What was the relationship between support for and awareness of the benefits of vocational education programs in alternative secondary schools?

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, the following assumptions were included:

- 1) The study respondents were accurate, honest, and truthful in

their completion of the survey questionnaire.

- 2) The survey instrument employed was an adequate assessment tool for measuring levels of administrative awareness and support within alternative secondary schools.
- 3) The statistical procedures employed were appropriate and adequate for the research design and data analysis components of the study.
- 4) Administrative awareness and support were measurable variables within alternative secondary education.
- 5) Some degree of correlation, regardless of size, existed between administrative awareness and support, warranting the inquiry.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The study included the following limitations and resulting delimitations:

- 1) Perceptions examined in the investigation were limited to alternative secondary school administrators.
- 2) The respondents were limited to those schools registered with the Project on Alternatives in Education at Hofstra University. The registry did not include a listing of private alternative secondary schools or those operating without public funds.
- 3) The data collected in the study pertained to the 1993 -1994 academic year and the findings of the study are only generalizable to

the 46% of the sample who responded to the study.

- 4) Cause and effect relationships of perceptions were not addressed nor examined in the study.
- 5) Findings were not and should not be generalized beyond the public alternative secondary schools who responded to the study.

Definitions

For the purposes of the current investigation, the following terms were operationally defined:

- 1) Administrative Support: An attitude projected by the school's administrator that creates a climate or atmosphere of success in the school relating to a particular educational innovation (Clark, Lotto, & McCarthy, 1980). The elements of administrative support in relation to a particular educational program fall into four categories (Arends, 1982): providing verbal support for the program; providing program organization members with a sense of clarity and a measure of steadiness; providing defense for program goals and activities; and providing something of value to program organization members. For the purposes of this study administrative support was defined in terms of application of administrative skills which were consistent with the National Association for Secondary School Principals Assessment Center Project that identified 12 skill categories of administrative functioning (see Appendix A).

2) Alternative School: An educational program in a public school district or sponsored by private institutions that offered a choice of more than one educational option to students who may have been incompatible or uncomfortable in conventional learning environments (National School Boards Association, 1976). Alternative schools typically exhibit the following characteristics (National School Public Relations Associations, 1972): voluntary participation, meaning students and teachers freely choose to participate in the school; distinctiveness, where each alternative school differs in some fundamental way from the conventional school; nonexclusive, in that the school is open to all students on a voluntary basis; comprehensive objectives, where a set of comprehensive learning objectives exist in the school equivalent to those of conventional schools; and learning environment, where a supportive learning environment which relates to and is supportive of the different student learning styles of at-risk youth.

3) At-risk Student: Traditionally 13 to 19 year-old learners who are not likely to matriculate through the twelfth grade level. These learners typically have been classified as potential “drop-outs” from secondary school institutions. Some of the problems at-risk students face have included, family dysfunction, poverty, low grades or low academic achievement, teen pregnancy, chemical dependency,

adjudication, excessive absenteeism, health problems, and discipline problems (Novak, 1989).

4) Vocational Education: Education for any occupation which normally requires less than a baccalaureate degree for the beginning worker (Evans & Herr, 1978). Miller and Mahler (1991) defined vocational education as:

Practically illustrated and attempted job or career skill instruction. As such, a variety of components fall under the vocational education umbrella, commonly divided into eight areas: agriculture, business education, health occupations, home economics, marketing education, technical education, technology education, and trade and industrial education (p. 6).

Significance of the Study

In the United States there has been a need to serve the at-risk student populations who represent a growing and significant portion of secondary school age students. Current estimates of the proportion of American children who have been identified as at-risk generally range from 10-25%, dependent upon the indicators used to define "at-risk" (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Some estimates of those at-risk of educational failure and lifelong dependency on social support programs have been as high as 30% (Committee on Economic Development, 1985). Additionally, it has been reported that the dropout rate for at-risk minority males in a

number of urban centers is nearly 50% (Education Commission of the States, 1985).

Cuban (1989) cited certain factors common to successful secondary educational programs for at-risk youth. These factors included smaller class size, personalized instruction, and community support of the school's efforts. Brown and Harris (1988) related an at-risk student's success in school to positive school leadership, recognition of student achievements, and recognition of students as individuals. Alternative secondary school systems typically meet these learning conditions (Piland, 1984). Many at-risk students who have been placed in alternative secondary schools or who choose to attend are noted to be at a critical juncture in their lives (Glasser, 1990). Additionally, leaders in vocational education have called for an investigation of the at-risk phenomenon that will lead to workable remediating or preventative strategies to alleviate or significantly lessen the problem (Rojewski & Meers, 1990).

Vocational instruction has a long history of working with special needs populations, lending relevance to general education course work (Evans & Herr, 1978; Phelps & Lutz, 1977). Vocational programs have focused on at-risk students by increasing career path options and using creative methods of job training, such as education programs that link theoretical classroom training to work based