

1995

A Survey of At-Risk Students Enrolled in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program

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A Survey of At-Risk Students Enrolled
in Beck Area Vocational Center's
Optional Education Program

Robert D. Knutson

Field Experience

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Specialist In Education

In the Graduate School, Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois

1995

I Hereby Recommend This Field Experience Be Accepted As
Fulfilling This Part of the Graduate Degree Cited Above

7-10-95

Date



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Optional Education Program
Robert D. Knutson
Eastern Illinois University**

Running Head: AT-RISK STUDENTS

Abstract

The main purpose of this field experience was to survey students who participated in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program (OEP) in Red Bud, Illinois, to data needed to construct a profile of the typical at-risk youth within a 50-mile radius of Beck. This, in turn, would set the stage for the construction and implementation of an instrument that might be used to identify other potential at-risk youth at the high school level in the area.

The 71 students in the survey were asked to respond to survey questions that had been deemed successful in distinguishing dropouts from non-dropouts.

In addition, a review of current literature associated with at-risk characteristics and the at-riskness of high school age students was presented.

An analysis of the survey results indicated that the at-risk students in the area do possess some uniqueness; however, for the most part, data collected on a national level were found to be consistent with that collected in this study.

The findings and recommendations from this study emphasize that, even though data collected nationwide has proven accurate,

some unique characteristics overall for the area did exist. These findings suggest that when gathering data needed, the research instrument should allow customization for local variables.

Chapter 1

Overview

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to survey students who participated in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program (OEP) in Red Bud, Illinois, during the Spring 1995 semester in regards to establishing personal and at-risk data that each might be willing to share. These data, in turn, were used to construct a profile of the typical at-risk student that could be used to develop an instrument to identify other potential at-risk youth at the high school level in the area.

Because Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program serves students from 13 local high schools within a 50-mile radius, it was felt that the data collected and the profile generated would be representative of the typical at-risk youth for the immediate area.

Currently, no such profile or supporting information exists for the area. Statewide research on the at-risk topic is sparse, limited in scope, and generally characteristic of larger urban areas. However, on a national level, research that exists in the area of identifying

at-risk youth stressed the importance of generating profile data specific to an individual area before constructing an instrument for identifying potential at-risk youth. It was felt that these data would then be more representative of the students in the area of concern.

Another intention of this study was to collect sufficient data needed to generate a local profile that would aide high school officials in their attempts at identifying potential at-risk students earlier.

Background

Beck Area Vocational Center has been in existence for 20 years. As an area vocational center, it has six member schools that send anywhere from 15 to 50 high school students daily. Students may choose from the vocational programs offered currently at Beck that have been approved by the Illinois State Board of Education's Department of Adult Vocational and Technical Education.

The vocational offerings include: Accounting/Computers, Auto Body Repair, Auto Mechanics, Child Care, Computer-Aided Drafting, Electronics, Health Occupations, Secretarial/Computers, and Welding. All nine vocational courses are current with competency-based curriculums. All the necessary instruction, equipment, maintenance, and labs are provided. Beck Area Vocational Center has been

offering top-notch vocational instruction for over 20 years and has managed to accumulate and acquire much state-of-the-art equipment.

For nearly a decade, Beck Area Vocational Center has operated a successful Optional Education Program for area dropouts and at-risk students. This program fuses academic and vocational education with a primary goal of improving student attendance and retention in school. In the end, the result is a productive, literate, and employable young person with a high school diploma. Beck's Optional Education Program offers the following services: basic/remedial academics; vocational and career education; social and emotional services for students in need; bus transportation; and a lunch program.

The Optional Education Program at Beck Area Vocational Center is designed to assist high school students who have been unsuccessful in a traditional school environment. These students typically have a history of adverse behavior, chronic truancy, low self-esteem and/or special personal problems which lead to frustration with school and, eventually, termination of formalized education. The OEP provides these individuals an opportunity to experience academic success, learn a vocational skill, and improve self-esteem.

Successful students will earn high school credits toward a high school diploma from their home school, plus have employability skills which could lead to gainful employment. Classes are generally small (10-15 students), providing for a great deal of individualized teaching methods and personalized counseling services.

The Optional Education Program at Beck welcomes and encourages any student who has dropped out of school for one reason or another to apply. The program also communicates with 15 area high schools and their principals in identifying potential at-risk youth early before they drop out.

A potential candidate must meet the following criteria to interview for a slot in the program: student must have been referred by his/her school principal; student must range in age from 15 1/2 to 21 years; parent/guardian must accompany the student; student and parent must be willing to sign a statement agreeing to abide by the rules and regulations governing the program; a transcript of previous school work must be provided; student must be willing to enroll in vocational classes; and the student must be seeking a high school diploma. If the student meets all of the above, the principal schedules an appointment date. During the interview, the decision to enroll the

student is based primarily on the student's sincerity and qualifications of at-risk tendencies.

This program's mission is simple--to help the dropout and at-risk youth in the area get a second chance at a first-rate high school education and get them back into the game of life.

Demographics

Beck Area Vocational Center is located on a former NIKE military site in a remote section in Monroe County. The setting is serene and tranquil and void of distractions. The Center is located in northeastern Monroe County just between Routes 13 and 159, approximately 30 minutes from downtown Belleville and 45 minutes from downtown St. Louis.

The 50-mile radius is composed of mostly farm land and small rural communities consisting of predominantly white, middle class, blue collar workers.

Statement of the Problem

This writer has been involved in the Optional Education Program at Beck Area Vocational Center in Red Bud, Illinois, as principal for the last two years. An important duty of the principal of this program is to solicit referrals, and identify, interview, and enroll at-risk students

from approximately a 50-mile radius into the Optional Education Program. Because of little research in regards to small rural populace, it was felt that a current profile and formal method of identifying potential candidates for enrollment was needed.

During the last two years the Optional Education Program at Beck has experienced unprecedented growth. It is felt that by comparing data collected from students at Beck with data provided from other studies nationwide, a profile of the typical at-risk student could be formulated, allowing for the construction of an evaluation instrument. This tool would aid in better assessment of the at-risk nature of candidates for enrollment into the Optional Education Program at Beck Area Vocational Center.

With the number of seats at Beck's Optional Education Program limited to 90, it is felt that each seat should be filled with a student most deserving. The planned research would provide an accurate assessment of small rural communities and would assure that those in most need are identified and referred, in order to receive the proper services.

Assumptions

In order for this study to provide meaningful data, it was assumed that most of the students enrolled in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program who received the survey would complete and return it. Students in Beck's Optional Education Program were chosen to complete the questionnaire under the assumption that, in their capacity, they had an adequate knowledge to respond to the questions. It was further assumed that the students would be as honest and forthright as possible when responding to the questions and that their answers would be based on their own experiences.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to students currently enrolled in the Optional Education Program at Beck Area Vocational Center. High school students (9-12) were the population used in this study. The survey was administered during April after which a number of at-risk youth had dropped from the program. The semester began with 112 students enrolled, but had an enrollment of 78 when the survey was administered.

Because the data for the study were obtained from a sample of rural at-risk youth in Monroe, Randolph, St. Clair, and Washington

Counties in southwestern Illinois, caution must be exercised when generalizing the findings of this study to other areas in different locations. The research data were developed for implementation in school districts in rural, blue collar, farming, and light industrial communities.

In addition, the findings were limited by the validity of the instrument used to collect the data. The findings were limited by the degree of accuracy which the participating students exercised in completing the survey. The findings were also limited by the total number of surveys completed and returned.

Delimitations

This study focused only on each student's personal data as perceived by him/her. Only students from public schools in Monroe, Randolph, St. Clair, and Washington Counties who are enrolled in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program were surveyed. The school districts chosen for this survey were located within a 50-mile radius of Beck Area Vocational Center.

Definition of Terms

1. At-risk students: High school students identified as potential high school dropouts.
2. Beck Area Vocational Center: Area Vocational Center located in rural Monroe County. The Center was established over 20 years ago and continues to provide low-incident and high-cost vocational courses to students from member schools.
3. Dropout: A student in Grades 10, 11 or 12 who stops attending school prior to receiving a high school diploma or the equivalent, and has not requested that his/her transcript (academic record) be sent to another school or educational program (Callison, W. L., 1994, p. 98)
4. Low-income students: Pupils from families receiving public assistance, residing in public housing and other low-income housing, living in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, being supported in foster homes with public funds, or eligible to receive free or reduced price school lunches.
5. Rural High Schools: Schools serving communities of less than 15,000 people and serving less than 750 students.

Chapter 2

Rationale, Related Literature and Research

Rationale

At the time this study was initiated, no instrument existed or was utilized at Beck Area Vocational Center to assess whether or not a student applying to the Optional Education Program possessed sufficient at-risk characteristics to warrant enrollment. An instrument of some type that could be used during the initial stages of the identification process was needed. This instrument would encourage educators to use a systematic approach when evaluating students for at-risk characteristics and determining their severity.

Such an identification instrument would provide educators with a means of assembling accurate and timely data that would aid in identifying potential at-risk students early. In addition, educators would have an opportunity to formulate the intervention needed to address the potential at-risk behaviors before they seriously affected the learner's future and overall well-being.

By design, such an identification instrument could increase the number of students evaluated. The quality of referrals made by educators would improve, thereby decreasing the number of

inaccurate referrals made. Intervention strategies could be deployed early before problems grew more acute (Baruth & Manning, 1995).

This instrument could also be shared with member schools and used when considering a referral to Beck's Optional Education Program. Successful utilization of such an instrument would also increase the accuracy of referrals made from participating high schools and enrollment decisions made at Beck. The amount of time expended on the qualification process at Beck would decrease, thereby assuring that invitations to the program were received by those most deserving.

Related Literature and Research

Edleman has indicated that the first high school graduating class of the 21st century enrolled in first grade in 1988. From this generation would come the workers, parents, college students, taxpayers, soldiers, and leaders for the 21st century. The majority would be off to a fine start, but many would not (West, 1991).

The end of the 1980s and early 1990s brought with them a flurry of interest in addressing the at-risk youth of the United States. This interest was brought about by journal articles on at-risk conditions, implementation of numerous at-risk programs nationwide, and

acceptance that educators have a responsibility to serve the needs of all students, including at-risk adolescents (Baruth & Manning, 1995).

After examining data, the author attempted to develop an exact definition for "at-risk" students. For academic purposes, at-risk students have been defined as those students who, on the basis of several risk factors, are unlikely to graduate from high school (Baruth & Manning, 1995).

The number of adolescents who are at-risk today and the potential repercussions of not addressing these at-risk youth have been causes for educators' immediate attention for a number of years. In 1990, the United States Bureau of Census published a report explaining that, in 1988 11% of students over the age of 14 dropped out of school. This amounted to approximately 4.3 million students. Another alarming statistic estimated that, in 1993, approximately 3.4 million young people between 16 and 24 years of age dropped out of school before receiving a high school diploma (NCES, 1994).

To put this situation into perspective in economic terms nationwide, it has been estimated that each year's dropout class would cost the United States nearly \$300 billion in lost productivity and foregone taxes during the course of a lifetime (Muha & Cole, 1991).

A 1983 survey of more than 600 employers found that 82 % of all jobs "screened out" applicants with no high school diploma (Malizio & Whitney, 1984).

Research indicates that at-risk adolescents cannot be categorized by color, age, economic level or family situation. They come from all races. They consist of newborns, children, and teenagers. They come from wealth and poverty, two-parent and single-parent families. They live in rural areas, suburbs, and in cities (National Catholic Education Association, 1993).

The dropout rate in the United States has remained alarmingly high. Dropping out of high school is a decision that too many young people in the United States have made each year.

The 1980's brought about energy, efforts, and resources needed to combat the dropout crisis. These efforts were successful in encouraging and instituting research that addressed dropouts. In recent years, research has begun to take a more proactive stance. The 1990s brought with them the idea of addressing youth early before they dropped out of school. This research went toward identifying the at-risk tendencies of youth.

In the 21st Century adolescents will face numerous difficulties including: teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, anxiety disorder, delinquency and violence, poverty, and a host of other conditions and behaviors (Baruth & Manning, 1995). One area that research has identified as a disturbing trend is the growing dependence of young people on alcohol and tobacco. Abusers seem to be getting younger and younger. Research data have suggested that alcohol and tobacco find a home in the lives of many youth who find themselves vulnerable and alone and seem to have a firm grasp of their victims.

Perhaps one of the most difficult issues yet to be addressed is the poverty with which many young people are faced. As one of the most wealthy nations in the world, poverty has persisted in the United States and seems to place culturally diverse children at the greatest disadvantage (Office of Technology Assessment, 1991).

Current trends suggest that the "middle class" has continued to shrink and, with this fact, more and more youth have found themselves facing poverty. Left to face the world with no education, no job, and no future, it is no wonder many young people would turn to violence and crime. In an age when a youngster can make more money than his/her parents do in a week by peddling drugs for a day,

many high school dropouts have found themselves at odds with the law. In 1985, it was found that the level of violent crime perpetrated by juveniles in our society was three times greater than in 1960 (Nicholson, et al, 1985).

If the United States is to address the at-risk population, it must, as a nation, begin to understand the problems previously mentioned. Without an understanding or commitment to search for new and innovative ways to address these problems, intervention is sure to fail.

Without adequate identification, intervention would not be a possibility for thousands of potential high school dropouts. Without intervention, young people would become more desperate or destitute. For many, suicide would become attractive. Currently, suicide is ranked as the second or third leading killer among industrialized countries of the world. The teenage suicide rate in the United States has grown at an alarming rate. Some estimate that this rate has as much as tripled during the past 30 years (Strother, 1986).

Efforts, energy, and resources would be required for the United States, as a nation, to successfully decrease the chances of students dropping out of school. Educators and significant others should formulate alternative learning environments and accept and recognize

that some at-risk students do not respond to traditional approaches. Educators should accept responsibility for providing more appropriate educational experiences for all students. This would require a change of traditional thought that all students learn in the same manner and that schools should address only the needs of the majority (Baruth & Manning, 1995).

It appears that educational institutions would be in the best position not only to identify at-risk adolescents, but to assess the extent of at-risk conditions and formulate necessary intervention. School personnel (administrators, teachers, various resource and remedial specialists, counselors, psychologists, and social service agencies) should be involved in any identification process that is responsible for classifying at-risk learners (Baruth & Manning, 1995).

Educators should be called on to "identify student's demonstration of at-risk behaviors" (Baruth & Manning, 1995, p. 43). For years educators have possessed the necessary training to recognize at-risk characteristics of a potential dropout that parents and others might not recognize or be willing to admit.

By constructing an at-risk profile that depicts at-risk criteria specific to a geographic area, an instrument could be developed that

would provide the necessary data to identify high predictors of at-risk students for a specific area (Wells, 1990). By establishing a baseline of at-risk characteristics demographically suited for the young people in the area, educators could, with a high degree of accuracy, predict which potentially detrimental at-risk tendencies would play a role in identifying which youngsters might eventually consider leaving school.

Recent trends have utilized profiles of high school dropouts. These profiles have been generated based on individual student data from past dropouts and geographic trends.

As the author examined research and studies, he determined that there was some consistency among identification systems. At the present, many local school districts have just begun to address their need for designing systems that will allow them to identify students who may be at-risk. Educators have realized that they must work within the limited resources that are allocated. The identification process that is developed should utilize a cost-effective instrument that is capable of generating the necessary data needed to identify at-risk behaviors and provide an accurate assessment of the at-riskness of the student evaluated.

Some characteristics of at-risk youth were presented in Wells (1990) as identified by Lehr and Harris: exhibit academic difficulty, inattentive, short attention span, low self-esteem, truancy, health-related problems, lack of social skills, pressure, and lack of motivation. These researchers also discovered that at-risk students tended to be disorganized and needed help learning organizational techniques.

Wells, Bechard, and Hamby (1989) stated that checklists are most commonly used by schools and agencies to identify potential dropouts. Often characteristics have been gathered from research literature, dropout exit interviews, student records, and other sources. Educators should be aware, however, that checklists have several weaknesses. This approach could lead to mislabeling of students. It has been determined, however, that checklists may be useful as initial screening devices (West, 1991).

The construction of an identification instrument should be the first step in formulating a prevention program. It would be important to remember that variables do not have the same degree of predictive power. A checklist should serve only as a guide to help educators screen for at-riskness among youth (Wells et al, 1989).

Research data have established that there are common predictors that can be used to identify students at-risk of dropping out of high school. The evaluator should realize, however, that no single indicator alone warrants labeling, but rather a set of indicators are necessary to identify students who are potential high school dropouts (Wells, 1990).

Great caution should be exercised when identifying and assessing at-risk conditions. In the past, educators have utilized identification and assessment procedures that did not take into account the learner's special intelligences, gender, cultural, and developmental differences. It is possible that failure to take these situations into account could, in itself, place students at-risk (Baruth & Manning, 1995).

Finally, as stated by Baruth and Manning (1995), "regardless of how educators answer these questions, the strengths and weaknesses of at-risk children and adolescents must be addressed by caring, competent, and concerned educators" (p. ix).

Chapter 3

Design of the Study

General Design of the Study

As previously indicated, the purpose of this study was to survey students who participated in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program in Red Bud, Illinois. From this survey a profile of the typical at-risk student could be constructed that might be used to design an instrument to identify other potential at-risk youth at the high school level in the area.

Data were collected from students currently enrolled in the Optional Education Program at Beck Area Vocational Center. A survey instrument was developed by the researcher to seek variables found in research that distinguish dropouts from non-dropouts.

There is currently little data in regards to a profile or supporting information for the area. Statewide research on the at-risk topic is sparse, limited in scope, and generally characteristic of larger urban areas. Therefore, the intent of the study was to collect necessary data to construct a profile of the typical at-risk student for the area.

Sample and Population

The population for the study consisted of the 78 students enrolled in the Optional Education Program at Beck Area Vocational Center on Friday, April 28, 1995, when the survey was administered.

Respondents were high school students (9-12) drawn from 13 local high schools within a 50-mile radius.

The students surveyed typically have a history of adverse behavior, chronic truancy, low self-esteem and/or special personal problems which lead to frustration with school and, eventually, termination of traditional education.

The 50-mile radius is composed of mostly farm land and small rural communities consisting of predominantly white, middle class, blue collar workers.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The survey questionnaire was designed by the researcher of this study. The instrument utilized questions from numerous sources and would be considered a hybrid instrument. During the course of developing the survey instrument, research highlighted numerous instruments that would prove beneficial in the construction and make-up of the instrument utilized in this study.

The final draft of the survey instrument was developed to seek variables found in research to enhance student's at-riskness (see Appendix A for instrument). Variable information utilized included past attendance, academic success, interest in school, discipline referrals, educational level of parents, economic need, ethnic/gender distinctions, number of discipline and counseling referrals, family status, and various other factors.

Although the survey appeared to be lengthy, it could be completed within 10 minutes. Statistical validity and reliability are not available because this survey was designed expressly for the purpose of this study.

The researcher disseminated copies of the questionnaire on a class-by-class basis. In each class the purpose of the study was briefly explained and students were told that participation was strictly voluntary. Directions were given and the importance of reading each question quickly and making the appropriate response accurately was explained. It was also stressed that names or other identifiable information was not needed and that all information was confidential. Finally, a request was made by the researcher for honest and accurate feedback. Once this was done, students were given one sharpened

pencil and a copy of the questionnaire and instructed on what to do when finished.

Once all students were finished and all surveys in the class were collected, another class followed. Average time for completion of the survey by a class was 15 minutes from beginning to end. During the time students were completing the instrument, the researcher checked role for students participating in the survey.

As of Friday, April 28, 1995, there were 78 students in good standing and enrolled in the program. On the day the survey was administered seven students were absent. At the conclusion of the day, 71 (91%) students participated and completed a survey instrument.

Data Analysis

The completed survey responses were tallied according to the frequency of each response. The gathered information was then synthesized to reveal variables that proved prevalent with students involved in the process. The final results were then compared with data compiled during the literature and research review for this study.

Data from which a profile for at-risk students for the area can be developed was then constructed based on survey results and current

research and literature. This framework was designed specifically for the participating schools within a 50-mile radius.

Chapter 4

Results

General Information

The results of this study are presented in seven tables. Together, these tables provide the necessary data to construct a profile of the typical at-risk student for the demographic area explained earlier.

The purpose of this study was to seek and survey information from students enrolled in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program in Red Bud, Illinois. Surveys were distributed to all students enrolled in the Optional Education Program. Each student was asked to complete a survey. The survey was conducted on Friday, April 28, 1995, during the afternoon classes. All students in attendance on this day had an opportunity to participate. Of the 78 students currently enrolled in the program, 71 (91%) students were in attendance, and all agreed to participate by completing a survey instrument.

The following information was derived from school records based only on those students who participated in the study and is provided to supply the reader with additional data relative to the population surveyed. Students enrolled in Beck's Optional Education Program

that completed surveys were from various communities (see Appendix B for map). Town names, as well as the number of students from each community, are as follows: Cahokia-5, Chester-7, Columbia-2, Coulterville-4, Dupo-6, Freeburg-9, Marissa-6, New Athens-3, Okawville-2, Red Bud-12, Sparta-5, Valmeyer-1, and Waterloo-9. Of the 71 participants, 16 (23%) were female and 55 (77%) were male.

Age of participants was characterized as follows (number at each age level has been provided as well): 15 - 1 (1%), 16 - 23 (32%), 17 - 31 (44%), 18-13 (18%), and 19-3 (4%). Finally, of the 71 respondents, 57 (80%) of the students had been identified in the past as at-risk of dropping out of high school, along with 14 (20%) who were considered retrieved dropouts.

Family, Home, and Community Status

Table 1 illustrates in what type of family environment students live, family structure, and how long they have lived in their present community. The consensus of students responding reported living with both mother and father (41%) in a house (68%) in the same community for more than 4 years (69%).

Table 1Family, Home, and Community Status

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
1. I live:		
in a single parent household.	15	21
in a step family household(s).	10	14
with mother and father.	29	41
other(s)	17	24
15. Which of the following best describes where you live?		
House	48	68
Apartment/Duplex	8	11
Mobile/trailer home	12	17
Hotel/Motel	3	4
Other	0	0
14. How long have you lived in your present community?		
Less than one year	7	10
1 or 2 years	6	8
3 or 4 years	9	13
More than 4 years	49	69

Head of Family and Educational and Employment Status

Continuing demographic information, respondents were asked to identify the head of their family and that person's educational and employment level. Table 2 illustrates that a significant number designated the father as the head of the family (45%); however, 30% identified the mother. The head of the family's education ranged from acquiring some high school (28%) to earning a high

Table 2Head of Family and Educational and Employment Status

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
2. Who is considered the head of your family?		
father	32	45
step-father	8	11
mother	21	30
step-mother	0	0
other	10	14
3. How far did the head of your family go in school?		
some high school	20	28
high school graduate/GED	35	49
community/junior college 1-2 years	8	11
4 year college graduate	7	10
post-graduate or professional training	1	1
4. Is the head of your family?		
employed	60	85
unemployed	8	11
retired	3	4

school diploma/GED (49%) and in most households head of the family were employed (85%).

Home School Information

Past home school information of the respondents presented questions that determined whether or not students liked/disliked school in the past, determined feelings toward past school experience, student grades, absenteeism, special needs, and extra-curricular

participation. As indicated in Table 3, the majority of participants disliked their past school experiences (66%) and found school a waste of time (37%) or difficult (25%). Over 80% of the students surveyed reported that their average grades were D's (52%) and F's (32%). Absences proved atrocious with 35% stating they missed more than 25 days during their last school year.

When asked about special needs, 76% answered that they had none and 18% or 13 students acknowledged that they had been labeled learning disabled in the past. Over half of the respondents surveyed (56%) participated in some type of extra-curricular activities while at their home school.

Twenty-five percent of the respondents reported visiting with their high school counselor frequently (three or more times a year) and 41% occasionally (once or twice a year). Almost two-thirds (65%) of those students participating in this study had been sent to the office frequently (three or more times a year), and an additional 23% had found their way to the principal's office occasionally (once or twice a year). A large number (55%) of respondents indicated that they had to repeat a grade in school.

Table 3Home School Information

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
5. Did you like school while attending your home school?		
yes	10	14
no	47	66
mixed feeling(s)	14	20
6. While attending your home school did you find school:		
difficult.	18	25
easy.	0	0
a waste of time.	26	37
worthwhile.	6	8
mixed feeling(s).	21	30
8. What were your average grades the last year you attended your home school?		
A's	0	0
B's	2	3
C's	9	13
D's	37	52
F's	23	32
9. Estimate how many days you were absent during the last complete year you attended your home school?		
zero to ten days	16	23
eleven to fifteen days	12	17
sixteen to twenty days	7	10
twenty-one to twenty-five days	11	15
more than twenty-five days	25	35
10. Do you have any special needs?		
No	54	76
Learning Disable	13	18
Speech Impaired	1	1
Hearing/Visually Impaired	1	1
other	2	3

(table continues)

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
11. While at your home school did you participate in extra-curricular activities (athletics, vocational activities, drama, music, etc.)?		
yes	40	56
no	31	44
12. How often did you have contact with a high school counselor at your home school?		
frequently (3 or more times a year)	18	25
occasionally (once or twice a year)	29	41
never	24	34
13. At your home school how often were you sent to the office for disciplinary measures?		
frequently (3 or more times a year)	46	65
occasionally (once or twice a year)	16	23
never	9	13
7. Have you ever been held back (had to repeat a grade) in school?		
yes	39	55
no	32	45

Employment and Future Plans

Respondents were asked to indicate employment abilities and where they planned to be one year after earning a high school diploma or GED. As represented in Table 4, over three fourths (79%) of students who sought employment were able to find work within the past year. When prompted to share future plans, the

Table 4Employment and Future Plans

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
16. If you have looked for work within the past year, did you find a job?		
yes	56	79
no	11	15
does not apply	4	6
26. Indicate where you plan to be one year after completing high school.		
College/university	17	24
Vocational school (secretary, mechanic, etc.)	16	23
Full time job/self employment	17	24
Military	9	13
Unsure/other	12	17

distribution was fairly equal between college, vocational school, and full-time job.

Drugs and/or Alcohol

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they had ever used any of the following substances: alcohol, tobacco products, marijuana, inhalants, cocaine/crack, LSD/mushrooms/acid, and steroids. Table 5 illustrates that over two thirds (70%) of students surveyed reported that they used tobacco products on a daily basis. In addition 38% reported drinking alcohol once or twice a week. Approximately one in five (21%) of respondents reported smoking

Table 5Drugs and/or Alcohol

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
How often do you use the following drugs?		
18. Alcohol		
Daily	3	4
Once or twice a week	26	38
Once or twice a month	19	28
Once or twice a year	12	18
Never	8	12
19. Tobacco products (cigarettes, cigars, chew)		
Daily	48	70
Once or twice a week	4	6
Once or twice a month	3	4
Once or twice a year	3	4
Never	11	16
20. Marijuana		
Daily	15	21
Once or twice a week	7	10
Once or twice a month	7	10
Once or twice a year	13	19
Never	28	40
21. Inhalants (glue, paint, gasoline)		
Daily	1	1
Once or twice a week	1	1
Once or twice a month	2	3
Once or twice a year	1	1
Never	63	93
22. Cocaine/Crack		
Daily	2	3
Once or twice a week	2	3
Once or twice a month	5	7
Once or twice a year	5	7
Never	54	80

(table continues)

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
23. LSD, Mushrooms, Acid		
Daily	3	4
Once or twice a week	0	0
Once or twice a month	15	22
Once or twice a year	3	4
Never	48	70
24. Steroids (anabolic/muscle building)		
Daily	1	1
Once or twice a week	1	1
Once or twice a month	0	0
Once or twice a year	0	0
Never	66	97
25. To your knowledge have members of your family ever used alcohol or drugs in a way that has caused arguments or concern?		
yes	38	54
no	32	46

marijuana on a daily basis. Of inhalants, cocaine/crack, LSD/mushrooms/acid and steroids, only LSD/mushrooms/acid were found to be of any significance. Slightly over half (54%) of the students surveyed had members of their family who had used alcohol and/or drugs in a way that had caused arguments or concern.

Social Inventory

A number of questions asked respondents to provide social information about economic matters, whether they had children,

juvenile delinquency, physical and sexual abuse, suicide, sleep, depression, and personal safety at school.

As shown in Table 6, about one third (32%) of students surveyed receive or are eligible for public assistance of some nature. Only five (7%) had children. In the last 12 months, 29% of the students stated that they had been in trouble with the law two or more times. Of these students, approximately one fourth (24%) had ever been in a jail or juvenile detention center for any period of time.

Over one third (36%) of students indicated that when their parents had been angry with them, they had been hit hard enough to leave a mark, bruise, cut lip, or other injury. Roughly 25% maintained that friends hit them or were rough with them during a conflict in the last two years. Just over 21% claimed they had been placed in an uncomfortable situation, sexually, without wanting it. As shown in Table 6, 28% of the responding students had attempted to commit suicide and 49% reported feeling depressed some of the time with 27% most of the time.

When queried of hours students usually sleep in a 24 hour period (including naps), 61% got between 7 or less hours of sleep per 24

Table 6Social Inventory

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
17. Are you receiving any economic public assistance or are you eligible for free or reduced lunches?		
no	48	68
yes	23	32
27. Do you have any children?		
yes	5	7
no	64	93
28. Have you been in trouble with police two or more times in the last 12 months?		
yes	20	29
no	50	71
29. Have you ever been in jail or a juvenile detention center for any period of time?		
yes	16	24
no	51	76
30. When they've been angry with you, have your parents ever hit you hard enough to leave a mark, bruise, cut lip, or other injury?		
yes	25	36
no	45	64
31. How often have your friends hit you or been rough with you during a conflict in the last two years?		
once	7	10
sometimes	18	25
a lot	8	11
never	38	54
32. Has anyone ever touched you in a way that felt uncomfortable, "messed around" with you sexually without you wanting it, or tried to rape you?		
yes	15	21
no	56	79

(table continues)

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
33. Have you ever attempted suicide?		
yes	19	28
no	49	72
37. How often have you felt depressed?		
never	12	17
some of the time	35	49
most of the time	19	27
all of the time	5	7
36. How many hours do you usually sleep in a 24 hour time period (including naps)?		
5 or less	18	25
6 to 7	25	35
8 to 9	18	25
10	5	7
more than 10	5	7
38. Have you ever stayed home from school because you were concerned for your personal safety?		
yes	14	20
no	57	80

hour period. Finally, 20% reported staying home from school because they were concerned for their personal safety.

Medical and Dental

The next two questions surveyed students to determine when they last saw a doctor or dentist. Table 7 reflects the fact that most students (86%) had been to the doctor within the last year or less. In addition, 88% of the respondents have been to the dentist at least once in the last two years.

Table 7Medical and Dental

<u>Question</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
34. How long ago did you last see a doctor?		
1 year or less	59	86
2 years	4	6
3 years	1	1
more	5	7
35. When did you last go to the dentist?		
1 year or less	42	62
2 years	18	26
3 years	6	9
more	2	3

Questions 39-45 on the survey provided information superfluous to this study. The researcher made the decision not to report or use them in this study.

Chapter 5

Summary, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

This study examined students currently enrolled in Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program for at-risk characteristics. The student body of this program is comprised of students who have been identified as potential dropouts by their home school and referred to Beck's Optional Education Program. The program receives referrals from many of the local high schools within a 50-mile radius of the Center in Red Bud, Illinois.

The necessary data were generated by surveying students enrolled in the program. The survey instrument was designed to identify at-risk characteristics that each student might possess with the intent of producing a compilation of at-risk characteristics relevant to the geographic area of students surveyed. A thorough examination of the literature and research associated with at-risk characteristics was conducted to find out what at-risk characteristics have proven accurate indicators for potential high school dropouts in other studies.

A comparison was made between what the 71 students who participated in the study reported in regards to personal data related

to their at-riskness and what research and literature indicated were key indicators of students being considered potentially at-risk.

The results of this comparison would be used to construct a profile of the typical at-risk student for the specific geographic area. From these data, precise information could be developed and specifically tailored during the development of an identification tool to be used by Beck's Optional Education Program.

Findings

Demographic information revealed in this study supported what was found in literature. All of the respondents were homogeneous to Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program in Red Bud, Illinois. Each of the local high schools participating in Beck's Optional Education Program were represented by at least two at-risk students, in most cases three to five (see Appendix B). It was found that respondents were white, not hispanic (99%); over three-fourths of the participants were male (78%), ages 16 (32%) and 17 (44%); and 80% had been referred before dropping out. Data generated from the survey instrument were divided into seven areas. By completing this study, a profile of the typical at-risk student for the geographic area identified would be possible.

Family, Home, and Community Status. Less than half (41%) of students responding reported living with both a mother and father. This suggests that, for the students finding their way to Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program, a non-traditional home environment (59%) is the norm. For the most part, students surveyed reported living in a home (68%), and a large number (69%) indicated having lived in the same community for more than four years.

Head of Family and Educational and Employment Status. A significant number of respondents designated their father as the head of the family (45%); however, close to one third (30%) identified their mother. Data depicted the head of the family of well over three-fourths (77%) of those surveyed had earned a high school diploma/GED (49%) or less (28%), and in most households, the head of the family was employed (85%).

Home School Information. The majority of participants indicated that they disliked their past school experiences (66%) and many found school a waste of time (37%) or difficult (25%). Approximately eight out of ten students surveyed reported that their average grades were D's (52%) and F's (32%). The fact that 35% of

students stated they missed more than 25 days their last school year was consistent with the findings in the literature.

Only 18% or 13 students acknowledged that they had been labeled learning disabled in the past. Unlike what was found in past research, over half of the respondents (56%) surveyed indicated that they had participated in some type of extra-curricular activities while at their home school.

One fourth (25%) of the respondents reported visiting with their high school counselor frequently (three or more times a year) and 41% occasionally (once or twice a year). Almost two-thirds (65%) of those students participating in this study had been sent to the office frequently (three or more times a year) and an additional 23% had found their way to the principal's office occasionally (once or twice a year). A large number (55%) of respondents indicated that they had to repeat a grade in school.

Employment and Future Plans. According to survey results, over three fourths (79%) of students who sought employment were able to find work within the past year. When prompted to share future plans, the distribution was fairly equal between college, vocational school, and full-time job.

Drugs and/or Alcohol. Nearly seven out of ten students (70%) reported that they used tobacco products on a daily basis. Slightly more than 38% reported drinking alcohol once or twice a week with approximately one in five (21%) of the respondents reporting they smoked marijuana on a daily basis. Of inhalants, cocaine/crack, LSD/mushrooms/acid and steroids, only LSD/mushrooms/acid was found to be of any significance with 22% of students reporting using once or twice a month. Many of the students surveyed (54%) indicated having members of their family who had used alcohol and/or drugs in a way that has caused arguments or concern.

Social Inventory. Nearly one third (32%) of students surveyed noted receiving or being eligible for public assistance. Only five (7%) have children. In the last 12 months, nearly three out of every ten (29%) students stated that they had been in trouble with the law two or more times. Of these students, nearly one fourth (24%) reported ever being in a jail or juvenile detention center for any period of time.

Over one-third (36%) of the students conveyed that when their parents have been angry with them, they have been hit hard enough to leave a mark, bruise, cut lip, or other injury. Roughly 25%

maintained that friends hit them or were rough with them during a conflict in the last two years. Just over 21% claimed they had been placed in an uncomfortable situation, sexually, without wanting it. In addition, nearly 28% of the responding students reported having attempted suicide and nearly half 49% reported feeling depressed some of the time with 27% most of the time.

Of students responding to the usual amount of sleep in a 24-hour period (including naps) 61% reported getting between seven or less hours of sleep per 24-hour period. Finally, 20% reported staying home from school because they were concerned for their personal safety.

Medical and Dental. Over 85% of students participating in the study indicated visiting their physician within the last year or less. In addition, 88% of the respondents had been to the dentist at least once in the last two years.

Conclusions

This study produced evidence that there are similarities between local data and published literature and research data. However, the study also highlighted several areas where data from the local area had its own uniqueness.

There is a need to construct and initiate an instrument that could be used in identifying the at-riskness of students during the interview process at Beck Area Vocational Center.

There were numerous similarities between data found in literature and research and data findings from the study. However, there were a few areas that the literature focused on that varied from the local findings. For example, students surveyed were predominately white, non-Hispanic, while other studies indicated larger minority groups as a focal point for at-riskness. Another area of inconsistency was provided by the fact that 85% of the respondents stated the head of the family was employed, where other studies reported a pronounced number of unemployed heads of family.

Nationally, studies have indicated high percentages of the heads of family as drop-outs, while this study identified only 28% of the respondents noting that their parents did not complete a high

school/GED education. In addition, a large number of students surveyed reported participating in extra-curricular activities before leaving their home school, while national research stated that at-risk students were typically not found to participate in these types of activities. With these areas identified and similarities noted, the outcome should provide a framework for a reliable identification instrument.

This researcher feels the discrepancies found should be taken into account during the construction and development of an identification instrument for the geographic area. To achieve this goal, the construction of an identification instrument must be completed in a sound and systematic approach with all parties (administrators, school counselors, etc.) present and instrumental.

Recommendations Based on the Present Study

The purpose of this study was to provide the parties at Beck Area Vocational Center's Optional Education Program, along with participating high school principals and counselors and other interested parties, some facts in regard to identifying at-risk youth and determining their at-riskness tailored to their geographic area.

This study revealed that, although there are consistencies in the type of at-risk characteristics that schools face across the board, there are still some that are relevant to specific geographic areas. For these reasons, the following recommendations are given. One recommendation would be to share the results of the study (profile) with all parties that might be interested or would benefit from such a tool that would aid in the identification of at-risk students.

Another recommendation would be the construction and initiation of in-service presentations for all educators, where data and profile information could be shared and ideas and/or suggestions solicited. In addition, parties involved in the identification and serving of at-risk youth should read current literature related to this area and should work to improve their skills in the area of identification.

Recommendations for Further Study

The following recommendations may be beneficial in further research endeavors. The present study should be replicated earlier in the semester to allow for a more inclusive sample. In addition the results of this study indicate that there are a significant number of young people in rural America that are at-risk of dropping out of high

school. Therefore, further study should be conducted in the area of at-riskness of high school students in rural areas of Southern Illinois. It might also prove beneficial to duplicate this survey to include surveys of students in similar at-risk programs in Southern Illinois.

Educators might also find it productive to open the study to all school districts in Illinois as opposed to just one geographic area focused upon as in this study. Results of the study might further be enhanced by comparative research on data between Illinois and other states. Finally, the present study could be expanded by using a research instrument which has been tested for reliability and validity.

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Appendix A

Survey Questionnaire**BAVC**Beck Area Vocational Center

Youth Questionnaire

Spring 1995

Thank you for your response to the following youth questionnaire.

All information will be kept confidential.

1. I live:
 - a. in a single parent household.
 - b. in a step family household(s).
 - c. with mother and father.
 - d. other(s).
2. Who is considered the head of your family?
 - a. father
 - b. step-father
 - c. mother
 - d. step-mother
 - e. other
3. How far did the head of your family go in school? (Check the highest level of education completed.)
 - a. some high school
 - b. high school graduate/GED
 - c. community/junior college 1-2 years
 - d. 4 year college graduate
 - e. post-graduate or professional training (M.A., Ph.D., etc.)
4. Is the head of your family?
 - a. employed
 - b. unemployed
 - c. retired
5. Did you like school while attending your home school?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. mixed feeling(s)
6. While attending your home school did you find school:
 - a. difficult.
 - b. easy.
 - c. a waste of time.
 - d. worthwhile.
 - e. mixed feeling(s).
7. Have you ever been held back (had to repeat a grade) in school?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
8. What were your average grades the last year you attended your home school?
 - a. A's
 - b. B's
 - c. C's
 - d. D's
 - e. F's
9. Estimate how many days you were absent during the last complete year you attended your home school?
 - a. zero to ten days
 - b. eleven to fifteen days
 - c. sixteen to twenty days
 - d. twenty-one to twenty-five days
 - e. more than twenty-five days
10. Do you have any special needs?
 - a. No
 - b. Learning Disable
 - c. Speech Impaired
 - d. Hearing/Visually Impaired
 - e. other
11. While at your home school did you participate in extra-curricular activities (athletics, vocational activities, drama, music, etc.)?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
12. How often did you have contact with a high school counselor at your home school?
 - a. frequently (3 or more times a year)
 - b. occasionally (once or twice a year)
 - c. never
13. At your home school how often were you sent to the office for disciplinary measures?
 - a. frequently (3 or more times a year)
 - b. occasionally (once or twice a year)
 - c. never
14. How long have you lived in your present community?
 - a. Less than one year
 - b. 1 or 2 years
 - c. 3 or 4 years
 - d. More than 4 years
15. Which of the following best describes where you live?
 - a. House
 - b. Apartment/Duplex
 - c. Mobile/trailer home
 - d. Hotel/Motel
 - e. Other
16. If you have looked for work within the past year, did you find a job?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. does not apply
17. Are you receiving any economic public assistance or are you eligible for free or reduced lunches?
 - a. no
 - b. yes

Survey Questionnaire (Continued)

Most high school students have experimented with drugs and/or alcohol. Please indicate how frequently you have ever used any of the following substances:

How often do you use the following drugs?

- a. Daily
 - b. Once or twice a week
 - c. Once or twice a month
 - d. Once or twice a year
 - e. Never
18. ☐ Alcohol
 19. ☐ Tobacco products (cigarettes, cigars, chew)
 20. ☐ Marijuana
 21. ☐ Inhalants (glue, paint, gasoline)
 22. ☐ Cocaine/Crack
 23. ☐ LSD, Mushrooms, Acid
 24. ☐ Steroids (anabolic/muscle building)
25. To your knowledge have members of your family ever used alcohol or drugs in a way that has caused arguments or concern?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 26. Indicate where you plan to be one year after completing high school.
 - a. College/university
 - b. Vocational school (secretary, mechanic, etc.)
 - c. Full time job/self employment
 - d. Military
 - e. Unsure/other
 27. Do you have any children?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 28. Have you been in trouble with police two or more times in the last 12 months?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 29. Have you ever been in jail or a juvenile detention center for any period of time?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 30. When they've been angry with you, have your parents ever hit you hard enough to leave a mark, bruise, cut lip, or other injury?
 - a. yes
 - b. no

31. How often have your friends hit you or been rough with you during a conflict in the last two years?

- a. once
- b. sometimes
- c. a lot
- d. never

32. Has anyone ever touched you in a way that felt uncomfortable, "messed around" with you sexually without you wanting it, or tried to rape you?

- a. yes
- b. no

33. Have you ever attempted suicide?

- a. yes
- b. no

34. How long ago did you last see a doctor?

- a. 1 year or less
- b. 2 years
- c. 3 years
- d. more

35. When did you last go to the dentist?

- a. 1 year or less
- b. 2 years
- c. 3 years
- d. more

36. How many hours do you usually sleep in a 24 hour time period (including naps)?

- a. 5 or less
- b. 6 to 7
- c. 8 to 9
- d. 10
- e. more than 10

37. How often have you felt depressed?

- a. never
- b. some of the time
- c. most of the time
- d. all of the time

38. Have you ever stayed home from school because you were concerned for your personal safety?

- a. yes
- b. no

Rate your ability on the following list:

- a. Always
- b. Sometimes
- c. Never

39. ☐ I feel positive about myself.
40. ☐ I can admit and deal with mistakes.
41. ☐ I can relate well with people of various backgrounds.
42. ☐ I am a responsible person.
43. ☐ I cooperate with others.
44. ☐ I can make positive choices in negative situations.
45. ☐ I can handle conflict without fighting.

Appendix B

Participating Schools Map

