

Optimizing academic prospects through behavioral modification in higher academic institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

The potential and capacity of the Nigerian student for academic achievement is often challenged by the social environment of the higher academic institutions. S/he has to face the challenges posed by peer influence, which may force him or her into alcohol and substance abuse, cultism, prostitution and other vices. This article discusses some of the root causes of these problems and suggests that the will of parents, teachers, administrators of higher institutions and the federal government should be integrated to address and make the necessary corrections in administrative processes that will facilitate the adoption of healthy behavioral lifestyles in higher academic institutions.

Keywords

Nigeria, Higher Institutions, Behavioral Modification, Root Causes

1. Introduction

The goal of educational institutions is to impact character and learning to students, so that they are adequately prepared for the labor market as well as cope with the vicissitudes of life. However many students unfortunately acquire undesirable behaviors and attitudes that will jeopardize the tenets and goals of the educational process. There is therefore a need to offer services in health education and health promotion to all the students enrolled in educational institutions. The aim of these services is to detect undesirable behaviors, determine the root causes of these behaviors, offer counseling to affected students and motivate them to adopt and be compliant with healthy and productive behavioral lifestyles. In addition, the students need to be physically and mentally healthy to cope with the rigors of academic pursuits. This entails health education and health promotion to avoid diseases, injuries and accidents, specific protection against common endemic diseases, screening and detection of diseases for early diagnosis and treatment, and limitation of disability from diseases and injuries (Park, 2007).

2. Common Undesirable Behaviors in Academic Institutions

These include alcohol and substance abuse (Essien, 2010, Yusuf, 2010), rape (Elegbeye, 2006), cultism (Oguntuase, 1999) robbery, prostitution and examination malpractice (Udoh, 2011) including sex and money for grades.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse: Some students come into academic institutions with these habits; others acquire the habits in the institution. Alcohol and substance abuse emanate from parents, peer influence (Yusuf 2010) and from frustrating experiences. Parents may transfer such habits to their children, when they come home drunk, or send their children to purchase alcohol and other substances, which are consumed conspicuously without regard to the influence it may have on their family members. These children then transfer the habits acquired at home to academic institutions, where they influence peers. Frustration due to failure to meet financial obligations, poor academic performance and desire

to live above one's means facilitate the acquisition of these habits from peers. Students with these habits can be detected through surveillance and monitoring of students' behavior by academic and non academic staff of academic institutions. This is especially important because alcohol and substance abuse may not be unconnected with obvious social, health, domestic and other problems posed by harmful alcohol use as evidenced in increased violence, accidents, and unintentional injuries (Obot, 2007). Evidence abounds to support the assumption that apart from the health and social consequences of drinking, declining academic performance and/or eventual drop- out holds potential for this population (Tumwesigye & Kasirye, 2005).

Rape: Rape has been defined as a physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration-even if slightly of the vulva or anus, using a penis or other body parts or an object (WHO, 2007). Though rape is being extended to include male to male rape, the discussion here is restricted to female rape by males, which is a form of gender based violence. It does not include statutory rape which involves minors, insane persons or mentally retarded persons, who are not usually members of the academic institutions in Nigeria.

Rape is more common in Nigeria than is reported because most victims do not report to the law enforcement agents. Most rapists are close friends or relatives of their victims. Some females in academic institutions unwittingly call for rape by their mode of dressing, which displays luring parts of the body. The site of the library in most academic institutions is far from the hostels and classrooms. Sometimes desolate roads and paths lead to the library. The quietness of the environment of the library is probably designed to enhance reading and learning. However it also provides opportunity for rapists to capture their victims. Many higher institutions do not have street lights and darkness encourages crime. The epileptic nature of power supply helps to keep the academic institutions in darkness. Rape is closely related to alcohol and substance abuse as well as cultism. Alcohol and substance abuse is an important characteristic of cult members who are then hardened to carry out gang rape (Ekeke, 2011).

Cultism and Robbery: Cultism can be defined as a ritual practice by a group of people whose membership, admission, policy and initiation formalities as well as their mode of operations are done in secret and kept secret with their activities having negative effects on both members and non-members alike (Ajayi et al., 2010). It was introduced into academic institutions more than five decades ago. Over the years, several cult groups have evolved in Nigeria. Some of the identifiable groups include the following: The Pyrates Confraternity, The Buccaneer Confraternity, The Eiye Confraternity, The Neo-Black Movement of Africa, The Vikings, The Mafia and lately, The Daughters of Jezebel, and The Black Braziers.

The earlier cult groups were set out for healthy fellowship. The Pyrates Confraternity set out to fight moribund convention, neo-colonialism, and tribalism and at the same time, defend humanistic ideals while promoting comradeship and chivalry amongst its members (Oguntuase, 1999). Then,

only very brilliant students were accepted as members. Today, the scenario has changed. It has become clubs for miscreants and never-do-wells. It is not unconnected with the level of corruption in Nigeria, which has enriched unschooled and half- baked educated people, who lack intellectual nourishment. Thus a vicious cycle has been established in which the axiom, which states that 'the end justify the means' is being passed from parents to children. It is not uncommon for students to become cultists with the sole aim of using undue influence and pressure in their academic pursuits. Cultism is also used in forcing girls to accept intimate relationship as well as settling scores with opponents and rival cult groups. Cultists may engage in armed robbery for material gains or for the fun of it. When accosted by law enforcement agents, they are often released by powerful people in the society. Cultism disrupts academic processes and may be used by unscrupulous members of the academic and non academic staff for intimidating fellow members of staff and obtaining un-earned promotion to academic and administrative positions. Cultism may be difficult to completely stop in Nigeria as those who have the power to do so are often cultists themselves. A situation where an intending head of administration of a higher institution is forced to become a cultist before he can be given the position is only to be deprecated.

Prostitution: Many female students practice prostitution for various reasons. According to Uzokwe (2008), it took several years for prostitution to seep into university campuses. As the vice evolved and began to consume our young girls, people chose to ignore it as a mere fad that would quickly go away. It was largely left unchecked and so took hold, becoming a way of life in Nigeria's citadels of advanced learning. In the beginning, some of the students may have loathed the strange lifestyle, but as they watched their indulgent peers return to campus, night after night, with wads of cash, glitzy clothes and other ephemeral paraphernalia, their resistance began to wear thin. He attributed prostitution in Nigerian Universities to gross dereliction of parental duties, declining will of teachers to play their traditional role of moral instruction to students, failure of parents in their financial obligation to female children, who are sometimes deliberately starved of funds in order to encourage them to acquire wealthy lovers, influence of Nigerian rich men, who splash ill-gotten wealth on female students with a bid to luring them to bed, peer pressure, bad government, poor economy and failure of churches, which prefer to glorify donors during fund-raising programs, thanksgiving sessions, and annual harvests rather than impact moral instruction and a Nigerian society that now glorifies wealth irrespective of its source.((Uzokwe, 2008)

Many female students are unable to meet their financial obligations in the higher institutions and have to become itinerant prostitutes for survival. Their types of customers range from commercial motorcyclists, commercial drivers through hoteliers to top politicians. Some are hired by politicians for sexual satisfaction of their visitors (Onwubiko and Okonkwo, 2013). Their fee ranges from 'two hundred

Naira' for the very lowly placed and desperate ones to thousands of naira for the highly placed and naturally endowed. The other type of prostitute is the financially comfortable daughters of the well to do, who prostitute for fun or as a part of bravado of cultism. The complications of this practice include sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS (Okafor and Duru, 2010) unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortions and unwanted children. The time spent in prostitution, and treatments in private medical centers is lost and cannot be used for academic pursuits. Besides, dropout rates increase with morbidity following HIV/AIDS, unsafe abortion and precipitate motherhood.

Examination Malpractice: Examination malpractice is a feature of poor attendance in academic activities and lack of serious preparation for examinations. It is a habit acquired from primary and secondary institutions. Several years ago, there was a politically induced proliferation of schools. The idea was that no student should have to travel for more than five kilometers to school. With this proliferation came the need to staff the schools with trained teachers. Many distance learning teachers training colleges were created to complement the existing ones. A fall out of this was the mass production of half baked teachers. Furthermore the adoption of the structural adjustment program, between 1986 and 1999, impoverished government workers including teachers. Corruption became institutionalized and the academic institutions were not spared. Many private schools were established. Most of these private schools advertised 100% pass rates in all subjects in West African Senior School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE). Most of these schools merely helped students to cheat in connivance with invigilators. Today this attitude has spread into many public schools and teachers no longer need to cover the Syllabus (Udoh, 2011). Teachers openly allow examination malpractice and make the students to pay 'cooperation fees', part of which is handed over to invigilators. Several examination centers have perfected the act of cheating so well that they have been nick named 'miracle centers'. When products of such examination malpractices are able to get into higher institutions, they easily embrace money or sex for grades lecturers, who are usually backed by cultism. Obviously, the products of examination malpractice can only bring down rather than contribute to the Nigerian economy. According to Odidi (2014), 'No country grows economically if her education system is not fixed to the core. The purpose of setting up examination bodies to test the ability of students in Nigeria is being speciously defeated by educational manipulators'. It is therefore of urgent necessity to curb examination malpractice otherwise graduates become economic and public health hazards to Nigeria. Though suggested methods of curbing examination malpractice include reduction of emphasis on certificates, better funding and reduction of strikes by lecturers (Odidi, 2014), I believe that the method of recruiting lecturers these days leaves much to be desired. Several years ago, good students were identified and later transformed into lecturers. Today several lecturers are selected through their close association with

politicians, who are simply interested in providing jobs for their electorate. Everyone now believes an applicant must be close to a top politician or 'somebody who is somebody' before getting a job. Lecturers in this category are simply interested in the amount of money they can collect legally or illegally from the university system and not in intellectual nourishment. Secondly the academic work in secondary schools is no longer competitive. In the past, there was pride in being the best student in the class. Even the best nine students in a class were celebrated and nicknamed as those 'under unit'. Thus, other students put in more effort to achieve the feat of being among the best. Today, report cards no longer distinguish dull from clever students and there is no need to put in more effort. As a medical student once expressed, 'if you score 69 and I score 50, we are in the same boat and so you have wasted your effort.' He was referring to the fact that both 50 and 69 are indicated as 'pass and not distinction' in the classless degrees of medical graduates. Thus, poorly prepared secondary school leavers are dumped in the Nigerian tertiary institutions. Some of these students may later become lecturers, and this can establish a vicious cycle that is capable of reducing the quality of products of academic institutions in Nigeria.

3. Effecting Behavioral Modification

In order to change the attitude of students from undesirable to desirable productive behavior, higher academic institutions should have counseling units staffed by health educators. In addition, counseling sessions should be introduced into the curriculum of all higher institutions in Nigeria. In these sessions students should be taught the consequences of undesirable behavior and made to ask questions freely. This allows them to gain the trust of the counselor, express their feelings and resolve internally to avoid risky behaviors and adopt healthy behavioral life styles (Park, 2007) Furthermore, social environmental modification (Park, 2007) of the higher academic institutions should be enacted in which sale of alcohol and illicit drugs are prohibited.

The control of students' behavior can be enhanced if there is adequate number of hostels for accommodation of all students, adequate number of reading rooms and subsidized feeding in the cafeteria. The provision of food subsidy tends to erode the gap between the rich and poor students and therefore prevent undue peer influence, jealousy and financial segregation. Besides, Lack of proper nutrition contributes to worse class performance, lower test scores, and eventually less successful students and a less productive and competitive economy (WHO, 2013). Transport services should be provided within large academic institutions and students should not be allowed to bring cars into the academic institutions. Dress code, which does not allow female students to expose provocative parts of the body, should be the rule. The male students should also dress decently. Though the tenets of health education is to allow individuals to willingly adopt healthy lifestyles, It should be realized that majority of present day Nigerian students are

teenagers and young adults who are not yet mature and who need some form of control to be enabled to properly develop their minds and capabilities for the future of the Nigerian economy.

4. Prevention of Diseases, Injuries and Accidents

Screening for locally endemic diseases is necessary for all fresh students. Those without adequate immunization should be immunized against locally endemic diseases. All higher institutions should have a health center capable of diagnosing and treating minor ailments and injuries at their early pathogenic phases. Early diagnosis and treatment serves to prevent the progression of disease into chronically devastating diseases that not only prevent students from attending lectures regularly but are also life threatening.

5. Conclusion

The Nigerians student's potential and capacity for academic achievement depends on the willingness of the parents and teachers to motivate their children and students to learn in a corrupt free environment, avoid risky behaviors and adopt a healthy life style. It also depends on the willingness of the Federal government of Nigeria to budget adequately for education and the National Universities Commission to computerize staffing of all Nigerian Universities to prevent double representation in accreditation of courses, programs, and facilities. This will discourage higher institutions from engaging substandard teachers with the aim of minimizing wage bill. Substandard instructors are very likely to be corrupt because their main goal is financial reward.

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