

# UNDERSTANDING ALL STUDENTS

## BEING INCLUSIVE IN YOUR COLLEGE ACCESS EFFORTS

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### BEFORE YOU VOLUNTEER

Understanding All Students

*When working with diverse groups of students, it is crucial to understand that students bring a multitude of life experiences with them to school each and every day which, in turn, can greatly influence their experiences with education. For many reasons, students face challenges in life, leading them to become at-risk of dropping out of school. This section is intended to provide a basic foundation to alternative education in order for CPV's to be better prepared and more understanding when working with at-risk youth.*

#### What is alternative education?

Alternative education programs are subsets of the traditional K-12 program. They are designed for students who can be better served in an alternative educational delivery system or who have been identified as having specific needs and/or are at-risk of not graduating. These programs seek to provide added flexibility and alternative instructional models and often include expanded services from the traditional setting such as online learning, institutional programs, counseling, childcare, and transportation in an effort to help students overcome barriers and meet the goals of the Michigan Merit Curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

#### What is at-risk?

An “at-risk” student is “any [student] who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, inter/intra personal relationships, [and who may drop out of school because of low academic performance].”<sup>2</sup> A common misconception of at-risk students is that they are part of a homogeneous group. They are not a specific group within society rather; the term at-risk encompasses a very diverse population of individuals. At-risk students cross every race, social class, gender, sexuality, and religion as well as urban, suburban and rural lines. This group is an extremely diverse group sharing the commonality of being at-risk of dropping out of school.

#### What does it mean to be at-risk? (One or more of the following may apply<sup>3</sup>)

- Challenges or troubles at home
- Learning challenges
- Substance abuse or addictions
- Physical abuse
- Intimidation
- Teen parent
- Lack of emotional support
- Sexual abuse
- At risk of dropping out of school
- Socioeconomic struggles
- Health issues
- Fear
- Hunger
- Single parent or non-parent household
- Lack of financial support
- Foster care youth

1. [http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530\\_30334\\_40027---,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530_30334_40027---,00.html)

2. Sagor, Richard and Jonas Cox, *At-Risk Students: Reaching and Teaching Them* (New York: Eye on Education, 2004) 1.

3. The characteristics and behaviors displayed above are not exhaustive of all possibilities when identifying at-risk students.

## What types of behaviors might I encounter? (One or more of the following may apply)

- Refusal to participate
- Apathetic
- Withdrawn
- Toughness
- Quiet
- Irritability / loss of temper
- Drug or alcohol use
- Disruptive / outbursts in class
- Threatening others
- An “I don’t care” attitude
- Depressed
- Aggressive or violent
- Toughness
- Argumentative
- Marked decreased performance
- Lack of sleep / drowsy
- Rejected by peers
- Inappropriate conversation / comments

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## What can I do to help connect with at-risk students?

**UNDERSTAND TERMINISTIC SCREEN:** Terministic screens are vocabularies or perspectives that are particular to members of specific socioeconomic, cultural, professional, or other social groups. Group members utilizing these vocabularies understand aspects of “reality” in different ways because each terministic vocabulary encourages members to “select” portions of “reality” while “deflecting” others.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is the manner in which people view and interpret the world around them based on their social class, race, gender, level of education, etc. For example, one person may believe that racism no longer exists because he/she has never experienced it nor witnessed it personally. Another person may be a frequent victim of racial discrimination or may witness it on a regular basis. Both have two very different perspectives on racism based on their terministic screen. If these two people meet and discuss the issue of racism, they could potentially encounter conflict or “butting of heads” regarding their differing perspectives. These perspectives, fueled by the vocabularies and personal experiences surrounding each person’s life, stem from their terministic screens. It is terministic screen that can make it difficult to fully understand others’ perspectives.

As a CPV, your position requires you to be open and non-judgmental as you are learning the terministic screens of the students with which you work. The goal is not to be “convinced” or to adopt or match a student’s terministic screen, but rather to withhold judgment and resist the temptation to be “right”. Simply attempting to see the student’s point of view and realizing how it differs from yours is a good first step. Then, you can gain an understanding of how the student’s experiences have shaped their view of the world. Understanding at-risk students’ terministic screens will allow you to connect with and understand them with more depth, allowing you to make connections and build stronger relationships.

**BE CLEAR WHY YOU ARE WORKING WITH THE STUDENT:** At-risk students may not be accustomed to people genuinely interested in helping them and may be suspicious of your motives. Be clear about why you are working with them and speak directly to them. Do not assume that they know why you are working with them or where you come from. This clarity will help build trust between you and your student(s).

**BE AUTHENTIC:** To connect with students, you must let them see you for who you are and be authentic in your interactions with them. It is common for volunteers to be anxious about how to connect with students. It is important to be yourself as students are perceptive and will not trust an adult who they feel is being “fake”. Begin by sharing something

4. Naomi Rockler, “Race, whiteness, “lightness”, and relevance: African American and European American interpretations of Jump Start and Boondocks,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 4 (2002), 398.

about you, or an experience that is meaningful to you. Being honest and open is more important than being the same. It is even okay to share with the students your own feelings of uncertainty, as it might put the student at ease and establish a human connection. Most importantly, be ready to listen. Ask questions about things that authentically interest you and resist the temptation to “correct” a student’s response or point of view. Listen for something you relate to and build upon that connection.

**ASK COMFORTABLE QUESTIONS:** Start with general, lighthearted questions to get to know the students and allow students time to ask you questions. Don’t make assumptions about students’ lives or upbringing rather, use general questions to reveal details about their lives. If students provide a surprising or shocking response, do your best not to react negatively, but ask additional questions to inquire how they feel about what they’ve shared, if it feels appropriate. At the very least, resist giving your opinion, brushing over the student’s sharing with positive banter, or making empty promises to the student. Show that you are someone safe for them to speak to without judgment.

**SHARE ABOUT YOURSELF:** Tell students about your college experience. Include information like how you chose your college and what life experiences led to your interest in your major. If the student challenges you, make inquiries about the student’s challenge, rather than reprimanding them. Most likely, such behavior is the result of a defense mechanism and, if explored, can lead to a better understanding of your differences.

**TAKE BABY STEPS:** Do not worry if you do not feel an immediate connection. Each time you meet with the student(s), remember something about the last visit or interaction to use to attempt to build a relationship with them. This will help students realize that you listen to them and care about what they say.

**DON’T GIVE UP:** Use different approaches as you work with the student(s). It may take time to build trust with students. Be patient and continue to let the students know you are there to provide information, answer questions, and help them get to college. If one approach doesn’t work, try another the next time.

**MAKE TOPICS RELEVANT TO THE STUDENTS:** Remember that your world and that of the student(s) may seem very different. Do whatever you can to make conversation relevant to your student(s) to help them feel comfortable. Even if you aren’t sure what topics may be relevant, ask questions and attempt topics that the student has indicated an interest in. By communicating topics of interest, you can begin to break down barriers.

**BE WILLING AND EAGER TO LEARN FROM THE STUDENTS:** Many of the students you will be working with will have strengths and knowledge surrounding things or topics with which you may not be familiar. Embrace these strengths and allow the students to take on the role of teacher and get a glimpse of how the student sees the world. Encourage them to share their viewpoints, ideas, and knowledge.

## Strategies to approach interactions with at-risk students

Start off with what you know and be authentic. You must be comfortable in order to help the student(s) feel comfortable. Start off with the basics; names, interests, similarities to you. If the student approaches the interaction negatively or highlights the differences between the two of you, then you must show the student that you are interested in learning. Ask questions, inquire about the student’s interests and life, and show that you are trying to develop a connection and that you also have goals for learning. You must establish that you are an equal, rather than someone there to solely “teach” or “help” them. You must begin by establishing a “we” approach – “We are in this together” and “We are going to work together”, etc.

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## Apathetic Student:

If a student seems apathetic or displays an “I don’t care, I’m not interested” attitude, do not force the student to participate. Do not be too focused on your “agenda”. Taking time to build rapport and connection with the student is invaluable, and will allow for more efficient exchanges once the student is comfortable with you. Rather than solely talking about college, try to have informal conversation with the student and share why you are working with him/her and share your passions. When attempting conversation, start with a broad topic that you think may connect to some experience or emotion of the student. Once you have established mutual ground or connection begin the process of funneling the conversation back to education using the connections you have established.<sup>5</sup> By making the conversation relevant to the student, you will see a spark of interest from them. Build upon this spark to expand conversation.

## Argumentative/Aggressive/Intimidating Student:

Whatever you do, do not engage in a similar behavior. Do not argue back and do not try to reason with the aggressive or intimidating behaviors of the student. You must stay calm and attempt to find a way to help the student feel comfortable enough with you to let their guard down. Once again, start by asking general questions or tell a story about yourself or your experience that will help break the ice. Remember that baby steps are still steps forward, and with time, you will build rapport with the student. (See Apathetic Student above)

## Withdrawn/Shy/Quiet Student:

Students displaying these characteristics may have encountered a negative past experience which could lead them to feel weary of their interaction with you, making it difficult to establish a connection. A student who is withdrawn, shy and/or quiet (introverted) does not mean that the student is not interested in you or what you have to offer. Thus, you must be creative and comforting as you approach your work with him/her. Similar to apathetic or aggressive students, you can begin by sharing why you are there, tell stories about something that may relate to an experience of the student, and/or ask general questions. It often helps to share about yourself to help the student feel at ease and not feel pressured to speak or share at first. Bring activities that can offer a focus for conversations and take the focus off of the student. This may help him/her feel more comfortable.

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5. Paul Hernandez, “Alternative Pedagogy: Empowering Teachers through Real Talk” (PhD diss., Michigan State University 2010).

# BEFORE VOLUNTEERING CHECKLIST

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## BEFORE YOU VOLUNTEER

*Before volunteer checklist*

- ❑ **PEOPLE BEFORE STUDENTS:** Remember first and foremost that the youth you are working with are people before they are students. It is easy to become captivated by our roles as volunteers, teachers, mentors, etc., but it is crucial that you focus on your shared human experiences as people first. This will help you establish a comfortable, trusting, and meaningful relationship with the youth.
- ❑ **SMILE:** Authentic smiles can help break down barriers by helping to show that you care, removing fear, and creating a more comfortable atmosphere between you and the student.
- ❑ **CARE:** Although a number of personal goals may be tied to why you are a volunteer, make a choice to care about the postsecondary achievement of the K–12 students you work with. Many at-risk students have never thought about college as an option or may not be familiar with college at all. You have an opportunity to authentically influence college dreams. Be careful to not seem overbearing or pushy as this could distance students from you.
- ❑ **BE CULTURALLY SENSITIVE:** A student’s community may be different than your home community; be sensitive to those differences. Do not impose your cultural views on the students but rather attempt to understand the student’s perspectives in order to better understand how to connect college within their lives. (Review “Understanding All Students” on page 2)
- ❑ **BE EMPATHETIC:** Try to understand the manner in which students view the world and try to be empathetic to their experiences and respectful of their opinions.
- ❑ **BE READY TO LEARN:** Be ready to learn about yourself and others throughout and as a result of your volunteering experience. Remember that you must be open to learning in order to maximize your learning experience. As you work with the students, they will learn from you while at the same time, you will have an opportunity to learn many things from them.
- ❑ **WEAR YOUR COLLEGE GEAR:** This is a simple but effective way to promote college. This not only demonstrates school pride, but it also sparks conversation about college. However, be aware that certain colors carry strong meaning in some schools and communities. Certain colors may represent a specific gang or group affiliation. Wearing the wrong colors may negatively impact your connection and work with students. If you are unsure which colors are inappropriate, select neutral clothing colors (grey, white, tan, etc.) that highlight your schools’ name or mascot or ask an administrator or teacher at the school prior to your participation.
- ❑ **BE PREPARED:** You are more likely to be successful if you prepare.
  - ❑ Print off necessary activities and materials from the CPV website: [www.micampuscompact.org](http://www.micampuscompact.org), under “Resources,” click “College Positive Volunteers.”
  - ❑ Know about your college and be able to talk about it by filling out “Talking Points about Your College” on page 17.
  - ❑ Feel better prepared to answer students’ questions by reviewing “Frequently Asked Questions” on page 8 and “We Don’t Know What We Don’t Know” on page 12.
- ❑ **BE SUPPORTIVE:** Encourage students to do well in school, to pursue their dreams, and to attend postsecondary education, by responding with “yes, you can”, not “maybe you can’t.” Positive encouragement is crucial for first generation college-interested students. Remind students that it is never too late to improve grades and strive to learn more. College can be an option for any student with determination and effort!

- ❑ **HAVE A MUTUAL GOAL:** Each time you engage with a student, have a personal and mutual goal for the session. This goal can be something stated with the youth, or it can be a goal you have in mind to achieve during the interaction.
- ❑ **BE INTROSPECTIVE:** Be aware that sometimes you will respond to a moment, the context, or the K–12 students based on the things that have shaped you, not what actually is or has occurred. Often times, ideas will be born from your interaction with the student if you are willing to listen and allow them to arise.
- ❑ **LISTEN:** Effective listening will help you develop appropriate CPV strategies for the students. Listen intently when students speak to you as you may potentially be the only person they have that is willing to listen to what they have to say.
- ❑ **BE FLEXIBLE:** Things may not go as planned, but that does not mean you have been unsuccessful. Flexibility fosters an environment inclusive to all students’ unique needs and characteristics.<sup>6</sup> Do not be afraid to adjust your plans or activities when interacting with students. Don’t take it personally if you experience negative interactions with or behaviors from students.
- ❑ **AVOID JUDGEMENT:** Many factors contribute to an individual’s life history. Take care not to judge the backgrounds, socioeconomic level, aspirations, parents/guardians, etc. of the K–12 student(s). Remember that the lives of many students may look very different than what you might expect or what you may have experienced.
- ❑ **BE INNOVATIVE:** Utilize the provided suggestions from the CPV manual, but modify them to fit the youth you work with. Create discussion points and use tactics that will be relevant to the youth. Be willing to try ideas/activities that the student suggests.
- ❑ **BE CONSISTENT:** If you say you will be somewhere, show up. Nothing says “I don’t care” like not being there.
- ❑ **BE PROFESSIONAL:** When volunteering, you represent that organization and your institution.
- ❑ **BE REAL:** Authentically share your personal stories based on your experiences. Being “real” will help to build trust and connections with the youth. Don’t try to be someone you are not based on fears of the student accepting you or making assumptions.
- ❑ **BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL:** As a role model, you should also be aware of how your actions outside of your volunteer experience may impact your presence at the community site.
- ❑ **EXERCISE CAUTION:** The youth are looking at you as a role model, but they may also look at you in ways you are unaware of. Try to avoid and discourage inappropriate emotions or actions. Stay positive and do your best to never react negatively to interactions with or information revealed by the student.
- ❑ **AIM HIGH BUT HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS:** A crucial role of a CPV is to have the expectation that all students are capable of entering and completing postsecondary education. Aim high but have realistic expectations about your influence on a student to avoid leaving both of you feeling frustrated and defeated.
- ❑ **FOLLOW UP:** Don’t make promises to the K–12 youth that you cannot keep or do not intend to keep.

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## BEFORE YOU VOLUNTEER

*Checklist*

6. Paul Hernandez, “Alternative Pedagogy: Empowering Teachers through Real Talk” (PhD diss., Michigan State University 2010) 37.