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WHEN THE PURGING PROCESS GOES WRONG: INVESTIGATING THE WEED-OUT PARADIGM IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY HIGHER EDUCATION

Chase Antonacci

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In an effort to understand the pervasive nature of ‘weed-out’ STEM courses in higher education, this research explores not only the historical context and impacts of such an approach to teaching but also the potential ways to mitigate harms from within the current pedagogical system. Until recently, little research exploring the conventional concept of weed-out education had been published; scholars now indicate that American colleges and universities operate under a veil of corporate influence that fosters an educational paradigm built on inequality where certain demographics—particularly women and underrepresented minorities—are fundamentally predisposed to undue failure in large, introductory courses. Due to the historical difference in socialization that persists in the traditional academic setting, these students often lack the support and resources needed to be successful. This continuing complication in academia that fuels wider socioeconomic disparity arguably stems from the first semester weed-out class where students from elite high schools often succeed and persist towards a STEM degree while others with less premium college preparation quickly change majors. Though abandoning the large, lecture-style classroom model has been successful in eradicating the weed-out effect, it remains impractical for many larger institutions. Now, new programs such as Peer Led Team Learning and Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning appear to be effective supplements to large introductory courses. Such programs divide students into small groups and assign each a role in the learning and communication process, thereby allowing him/her to foster confidence engaging with the material and ultimately overcome the pervasive weed-out effect.