



**“We take in some high-risk students,
but we don’t take very many”:
The Mobilization of Deficit Discourses
in STEM Intervention Programs**

Erin L. Castro, PhD
ecastro2@illinois.edu



Project STEP-UP

- Project STEP-UP (STEM Trends in Enrollment and Persistence for Underrepresented Populations) is a multi-year, mixed-methods study funded by the National Science Foundation



Qualitative Component

- Interviews: face to face; structured
- 2009/2010: n=55
- 2011: n=33 (new and returning participants)

- 13 different administrators from 2009/10



Framing the Problem

- How do we explain the overrepresentation of white males in STEM undergraduate majors?



Framing the Problem

- Educational Deficit Thinking (Valencia, 1997; 2010)
- Deficit Ideology:
 - Genetic Inferiority Theory
 - Cultural Deprivation Theory



“Underprepared”

- *“So while we see underrepresented students certainly at all academic levels...a disproportionate number are underprepared....”*
- *“...they [the students in our program] are not prepared.”*



Reframing Preparation

- *“...may come from academically underprepared high schools.”*
- *“We are not saying we don’t want students here, but are we prepared to make sure that domestic students are successful and how are we prepared to do that?”*



“At-risk”

- “[our program focuses on] definitely high potential and high achieving students that are at, once they get here, are at-risk compared to the rest of the population”



“At-risk”

- *“I oversee our at-risk student programs, and I help all the students that are on probation or academic liability, those that re-enter, things of that nature.”*



“At-risk”

- *“We support student organizations that are very keen on establishing a certain climate for students... So, we have the luxury of having students engaged in that way, that promotes further engagement for students that may be at-risk.”*



“At-risk”

- *“We do a lot of intervention stuff...so a lot of times we’ll say, ‘who are our at-risk people?’...[the long term goal for me is] have we increased retention for our at-risk groups?”*



“At-risk”

- *“We take some high risk students, but we don’t take very many...and when you bring in an at-risk student and they fail, then people are so done with you.”*



Reframing Risk

- “The high schools aren’t preparing these young women...”
- “They don’t have the same kinds of opportunities that students right here [have].”



Reframing Risk

- *“...it’s not about fixing students who need remediation, it is about institution change that creates an environment that is a richer learning environment so that students of varying backgrounds have the opportunity to participate in the mission of the university.”*



Toward a New Discourse

- If the goal is to change the status quo in STEM fields by increasing representation of traditionally underrepresented groups then it must start with how we understand the problem, which is reflected in the language that we use to describe students.



Toward a New Discourse

- Part of our work as educators, as administrators and researchers too, is to transform our language by reframing the problem so that we can then work to design more effective programming that responds to structural inopportunity.



Project STEP-UP

- More information:
 - Erin Castro, ecastro2@illinois.edu
 - Policy Brief: <http://stepup.education.illinois.edu/>

