

ACTIVE INTERVENTION PROGRAMS: PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION

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Abstract

Universities focus on various student development programs to provide a well-rounded and fulfilled college experience. Academic success is essential to higher education; however, life circumstances and other factors can inhibit students from succeeding. Thus, many students cannot meet the minimum standards required by universities; ultimately, landing in academic peril and on academic probation. Therefore, universities should provide probationary students with the necessary resources to raise their GPAs. To foster student success and support struggling students, active intervention programs allow universities to intervene, mentoring and teaching students the skills of becoming more successful. Using a variety of successful examples of universities implementing this type of support system, this article reviews academic success, students on academic probation, and the active intervention process.

Keywords: academic probation, active intervention, higher education, intrusive advising, student success

Introduction

Student success is a pertinent aspect of academics that universities must encourage and enrich; therefore, support must be provided for students who struggle in this area. Higher education institutions employ several methods to promote a student's academic success, such as tutoring, learning centers, and remedial courses. Active intervention programs are a type of student success assistance designed to mentor academic probationary or suspended students by teaching them how to become better learners while increasing retention by helping these struggling students get back in good academic standing. Through this type of intervention, universities can use the concept of accountability and mentorship to aid in student success and assist students on the verge of

failing. As such, this article will review academic success, students on academic probation, and active intervention programs, using case studies from several universities that have successfully implemented this assistance program to aid students and their university success.

Academic Success

In *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession*, Kuh (2010) broadly defines student success as “encompassing academic achievement; engagement in educationally effective activities; satisfaction; acquisition of twenty-first-century knowledge, skills, and competencies... and persistence” (p. 258). Student success is multifaceted, with curricular and cocurricular influences (Mishra & Aithal, 2023). A student’s success in the college experience is contingent on physical and mental health, as well as social, cognitive, identity, and academic development (Enwefa et al., 2020; Hamilton, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kalkbrenner et al., 2021; Mellor et al., 2015; Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). Student services and higher education professionals must actively participate in these influences to assist student success. Intrinsically, it is the responsibility of those in university student affairs to foster the academic achievement of aspiring graduates, assisting students in their educational goals. The development of campus-based, experiential advising programs helps higher education institutions define their goals for academic student success. Though the university staff’s responsibility is to promote success and assist students in their undergraduate track, various things deter students from a successful academic experience.

Inhibitors to Academic Success

As students enter a college environment, they face many barriers when transitioning their social and academic lives. Some students need additional assistance and support when integrating these aspects since many of these issues are related to academic, personal, or financial circumstances. Specific issues that deter a student from a successful academic record include low socioeconomic status, loneliness, long work hours, family issues, other social priorities, self-esteem problems, low motivation, lack of clear career goals, and poor time management (Bowden et al., 2021; Naylor & Smith, 2004; Ortiz-Lozano et al., 2020; Stelnicki et al., 2015). If students continue to struggle with the

transition to college life and do not adequately utilize campus resources, their academic performance also tends to suffer. Kirp (2019) found in his article, *The College Dropout Scandal*, that “40 percent of college freshmen never make it to commencement,” and unless university leaders “regard student success not as a risky business but as a moral imperative — the dropout problem won’t be solved.”

Students on Academic Probation

Universities have academic standards and policies to ensure students make satisfactory academic progress toward their degree completion. Though policies vary from university to university, these standards are generally based on a student’s grade point average. However, many students cannot meet the minimum academic standards required by universities and ultimately find themselves in academic peril. When this occurs, the student is placed on academic probation, a consequence of performing poorly academically. According to Bowman & Jang (2022):

Popular press articles frame [academic probation] as ‘intended to serve as a wake-up call’ (Nelson, 2019, 4, as cited in Bowman & Jang, 2022), ‘a red flag to let students know that they need to get back on track’ (Moody, 2019, 2, as cited in Bowman & Jang, 2022), or ‘a safety net’ for ‘students who are struggling to stay in college or find themselves on the edge of failure or academic dismissal’ (Bartkowiak, 2015, 2, as cited in Bowman & Jang, 2022). (p. 1286).

All these definitions suggest that academic probation is a tool designed to help students enhance their academic standing, stay in school, and graduate. Colleges and universities use this term to indicate when students do not make satisfactory academic progress. Students must improve their grades to return to good academic standing to be taken off academic probation. If a probationary student does not improve their academics the following semester, suspension from the university is possible.

A study by Tovar and Simon (2006) found that “35% of first-time freshmen—with a disproportionate number of Latinos—[were] on probation after their first semester at a large, urban, public community college” and as many as 25% of all students will be on academic probation at some point in their college experience (p. 547). Nearly a decade later these numbers stayed consistent, as Schudde and Scott-Clayton (2016) discovered

that roughly one-fifth of first-year undergraduates earned an overall GPA below 2.0, the standard benchmark for academic probation in higher education. Therefore, providing support services and additional academic resources to increase student achievement is essential in higher education, especially for struggling students. Universities should provide probationary students with the necessary resources to raise their GPAs. Using active intervention programs at the university level has proven effective in increasing an academic probationary student's chance for success.

Active Intervention Programs

Active intervention as an assistance program for academically struggling students helps better their chances of academic success. Chambliss' (2014) article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* cited that the Gallup-Purdue Index found that students who had accountability in the form of a mentor or professor who intentionally encouraged the students' hopes and excited them about learning were successful. This program also addresses the issue of academic probationary students being a forgotten population on the college campus. Retention strategies such as active intervention programs target students with less than exemplary academic records to help mentor them and teach them to become more successful students. Active intervention aims to intervene intrusively with the student's academics through mentoring to increase motivation and teach specific success strategies. Using an active approach versus a passive process is more beneficial because students are more inclined to take their success seriously. According to Molina and Abelman (2000):

advising interventions that are more intrusive (that is, include personal contact), generate student responsibility for problem-solving and decision making, assist the student in identifying resolvable causes of poor academic performance, and offer negotiated agreements or contracts for future actions outperform interventions that are impersonal, prescriptive, and nonnegotiable. (p. 7).

Additionally, the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) Symposium on Student Success (2007) reported that intervention strategies tailored to students with academic deficiencies must be more intrusive, characterized by mandatory meetings and active progress monitoring since this demographic of students do generally not elect to

utilize the support programs offered by a university. It also reported that this approach was an effective ingredient to student success, as indicated by those who participated. Moreover, in the last two decades, there has been increased reports of intrusive academic intervention in higher education (Jordan, 2022; Kitchen et al., 2021; Mattucci, 2021; Poole, 2015; Sims, 2019; Thomas, 2020).

Program Examples

The approach and desired requirements of an intervention program will vary from each college or university. Still, the overall goal of each program remains constant: providing support for students on academic probation. Creating intervention strategies for student success and retention has proved incredibly effective. The following section will review a small sample of universities that have successfully implemented various intervention strategies through mandatory courses for probationary and suspended students.

University of Arizona. A mandatory success course was implemented for University of Arizona freshmen who were placed on academic probation after their first semester. The effectiveness of this course was evaluated by comparing the rates of academic improvement, persistence, and graduation for participants and non-participants. Chi-square tests revealed significant differences in all these outcomes between the two groups. These findings suggest that the implementation of credit-bearing success courses, grounded in applied retention theories, could be a valuable strategy for supporting academically struggling students. (McGrath & Burd, 2012).

Henderson State University. Students in Retention (SIR) was developed in the early 1980s as a campus-wide retention initiative at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, one of the first of its kind. The program centered its learning objectives on students who were probationary, suspended, or admitted to any other academic conditions. Through various set requirements and other assistance methods, such as regularly meeting with an academic counselor, participating in supervised study hours, and submitting weekly reports, SIR assists academic probationary students in building structure and commitment to academics. The end statistics of this program were incredibly promising. As a result, probation rates for these students dropped from 10.2% to

8.2%, and suspension rates declined from 5.8% to 4.7% in the program's first four years (Garnett, 1990).

Michigan State University. The staff of the Undergraduate University Division at Michigan State University initiated an intrusive form of advising for probationary students called The Forum. MSU identified problems such as probationary students not meeting with their advisors, academic advisors needing more time to meet with every probationary student individually and advising appointments not focusing on long-term goals or improving learning strategies. Therefore, The Forum was developed to address these issues and teach probationary students to be effective and successful learners, forcing them to confront the causes of their poor academic standing. The students who attended The Forum and met with their advisor raised their GPA by an average of 0.578 points, and those who only attended The Forum increased by 0.47 points (Austin et al., 1997).

Lamar University. Monitored Probation (MP) at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, was established as an early intervention program to assist students in probationary and suspension status, designed to improve both a student's academic standing and college experience. The level of intervention (low, medium, or high) is determined on an individual case, based on the student's GPA, with other individualized strategies being employed on a need basis. In an academic performance study, the MP students had higher GPAs than the control group at the year's end and reported higher satisfaction with university experience and advice (Mann et al., 2004).

Mississippi State University. The combined efforts of the Office of the Provost and The Learning Center at MSU resulted in the implementation of the Learning Skills Support Program (LSSP) in the fall of 2005, which provided an alternative program in response to the university policy of requiring suspended students to take a leave of absence for an academic semester. The course's learning objectives are developing student study skills and effective learning strategies such as listening, goal setting, time management, concentration, note taking, and other skills. The course was designed to act as an avenue to hold the enrolled students accountable for assignment completion and participation in the LSSP and all their different courses. Seventy-five percent of the students enrolled in the

first five semesters of the LSSP completed the course requirements, and 65% of those successful students were retained for the following semester (Dill et al., 2010).

California Baptist University. The Office of Student Success at CBU developed the Academic Course on Excellence (ACE) in 2014 to support academically suspended students. The purpose of the course is to provide a last-chance effort for academic success to students on the verge of being dismissed from the university due to poor academic performance. It promotes academic excellence and personal success through learning strategies and concepts such as responsibility, facing fear, pursuing a passion, starting early, and procrastinating. The class is mainly discussion, accountability, and activity-driven, emphasizing the importance of attendance and confidentiality. In the 2018-2019 academic year, seven sections of ACE were taught, consisting of 45 probationary students. 86% of the students passed the course, and 71% of the students who passed ACE received a 2.3 GPA or higher, continuing their enrollment off probationary status (M. Osadchuk & S. Nielsen, personal communication, November 10, 2019).

Discussion

Addressing the needs of probationary students is a problem facing higher education institutions, given that nearly one-fourth of students will be on academic probation at some point in their college career. Therefore, universities must provide probationary students with the necessary resources to return to good academic standing. An active intervention program is dedicated to improving and tailoring services to students to impact academic success positively. The intrusive nature of an active intervention program allows for a more intense approach to adjusting student behavior, promoting academic achievement, and encouraging motivation, learning, and self-confidence.

The fundamental nature of this study is not expansive but does suggest a solution to a growing need within higher education. At an institutional level, higher education professionals and educators can learn from the takeaways from the program examples. These case studies can be used to promote the implementation of active intervention programs and inspire future research on the topic. As seen in the program examples, more interactions with a student on academic probation increase students' chance of academic

success. Developing relationships with these students will encourage personal and academic growth.

Additionally, the examples revealed that probationary students might need to be required, not simply encouraged, to participate in such programs. The employment of active intervention programs is oriented toward promoting long-term positive educational success. This can be a technique for universities to promote equitable educational experiences, especially for students within historically and systemically underserved communities.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions are challenged to provide enhanced academic support to struggling students. Students face many inhibitors when attempting to gain a bachelor's degree. Therefore, support programs such as active intervention gave probationary and academically suspended students a chance at a higher GPA and continued enrollment. The program examples show that some intrusion in a probationary student's academics effectively allows universities to assist the academically challenged through mentoring and accountability. Implementing and utilizing these active intervention programs at university levels assists students on academic probation to improve their motivational and learning strategies.

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