

Academic Probation Intervention through Academic Assistance Advising

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## Abstract

Retaining and aiding students on academic probation is a concern for all institutions of higher education. Students placed on academic probation by Rockingham Community College (RCC) have been encouraged to participate in an intervention program since the summer of 2006. When treated as an aggregate, the data regarding the program indicates that it was associated with positive impact on student outcomes. Active participation in the program was associated with significant increases in the likelihood that students on probation would avoid suspension, would improve their GPA, and would remain enrolled in their classes at the college. There were no discernible differences in outcomes for the various age, sex and race groups indicating a lack of bias in the programming. These results indicate that academic assistance advising is a potentially effective intervention with probationary students in college.

## Academic Probation Intervention through Academic Assistance Advising

Students placed on academic probation by Rockingham Community College (RCC) have been encouraged to participate in an intervention program since the summer of 2006. In the summer of 2006, 17 students were eligible for the pilot program. Nine of these students participated. The limited number of participants made statistical analysis of the results untenable. However, in the fall of 2006, 53 students were eligible for the program. 35 of these students participated in the program. In the spring of 2007, 59 students were eligible for the program and 27 participated. The outcomes for both participants and non-participants in respect to improving grade point average (GPA), withdrawal from classes, suspension, and being moved to good academic standing are presented in this report.

The primary modalities of the intervention implemented were regular interaction with an advisor and participation in academic support services. These modalities were chosen based upon the work of a number of groups at the college and their review of the applicable literature.

### *Literature*

Students do not enroll in college with the intention of failing. Various personal characteristics, academic challenges and life circumstances in individualized combinations contribute to failure. The question is, "What can be done to help students who have had limited or no academic success get back on track?"

A review of the literature by a number of parties on campus revealed the following trends. Advisor interaction has a direct correlation with student retention (Tinto, 1993; Gordon & Habley, 2000; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 1998). In addition, Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) work leads one to conclude that intervention with unsuccessful students involving advisor interaction and academic support services could be effective. As a result, intervention with students placed on academic probation through advising is a growing trend (Tovar & Simon, 2006) and has been described as intrusive advising. This concept as discussed by Cruise in the article "Advising Students on Academic Probation" (2002) combines elements of student retention and advising theory and can be directly and effectively applied to students on academic probation. Combining all of these threads, Higgins (2003) states:

"In an intrusive relationship, an advisor personally reaches out to students, meets with them, helps them identify the issues and situations contributing to their academic difficulty, helps them set short and long term goals, guides them through the development of a plan to accomplish their goals which includes advisor-student follow-up. Through the interactions brought on by intrusive advising the student's relationship with the advisor, institution and self grows" (para. 10).

The general focus of the literature regarding the impact of advising on student outcomes and the specific emphasis on intrusive advising found in the literature formed the background for the development of the RCC Academic Probation Intervention program.

### *Methodology*

The Academic Probation Intervention program was designed to create an advisor/advisee connection with two primary goals. The first was a personal connection for the student with a representative of the institution. The second, in some ways an extension of the first, was motivating the student to persist in school.

The pattern employed to establish a personal connection between the student and a representative of the institution involved post, telephone contact and e-mail. Students were notified that they were on academic probation by mail. This process took place at the end of each semester. The letter informing probationary students of their status and stating that they are to meet with an advisor in the Student Success Center came from the Vice President for Student Development. At the beginning of the following semester, the same students were contacted three ways; first by phone, then by email, and finally a note was sent via one of their instructors. While all communication from the college indicated a series of steps probationary students were to complete, the program was based on voluntary compliance. On average, 48% of probationary students responded to the initial contact.

During the first meeting with an academic assistance advisor, the student filled out an "Academic Success Contract." This contract included reflection regarding things that had gone wrong for the student in the previous semester and evaluation or reevaluation of student's goals for the year. The academic assistance advisor reviewed the student's transcript with the student to ensure they understand what probation status meant and what they needed to do to avoid suspension. It is also strongly recommended to each student that he or she attend three or more "Study Skills Workshops" as part of the program.

A pattern of personal contact was maintained with students throughout the semester. Each student was encouraged to meet with their academic assistance advisor every two weeks through out the semester. These frequent meetings allowed the advisor to understand what was happening in the student's life, both on and off campus, and to guide the student through difficulties that occurred using a joint decision making process. Concerns related to study skills that were commonly addressed were learning styles, studying for tests, test anxiety, time management, and how to approach writing a paper. Other issues that frequently arose in these conversations were relating to instructors, especially those with whom the student doesn't get along or with whom the student was not in agreement, understanding and practicing prioritization, dealing with the perceptions of family members who are without college experience, visualizing goals and talking through what would be necessary to achieve those goals, and balancing an illness in the family with commitments at school.

At the end of the semester each student's grades were evaluated and students were reclassified. Students who had improved their cumulative GPA to a 2.0 or better were returned to good academic standing. Students who had achieved a GPA of 2.0 or better for the semester but had not improved their cumulative GPA to a 2.0 or better continued on probation. Students who did not achieve a semester GPA of 2.0 were suspended. If the student was suspended, he or she had the option of initiating an appeal process. After sitting out for one semester, the student could apply to be readmitted to the college. As part of this process, the academic assistance advisor would provide evidence of participation in the Academic Probation Intervention program or lack thereof to the Suspension Appeal Committee. Participation in the program is taken as evidence of motivation and intention to change behavior when suspended students' records are reviewed by the Suspension Appeal Committee.

Data was gathered to determine the efficacy of the intervention program described above. A consideration of these data treating fall of 2006 and the spring of 2007 as an aggregate revealed a number of positive trends.

### *Results*

The combined data set, in part summarized below in Table 1, includes a sufficient number of individuals to be considered as representative.

Table 1

Cross-tabulation of outcomes for probationary students who did not participate in the intervention program, who met with an advisor once, and who met with an advisor three or more times

Category	Group N	% not suspended	% improve GPA	% taking withdrawal	% moved to good standing
Non-participants	46	21.7%	43.5%	15.2%	17.9%
Met advisor once	16	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%	0%
Met advisor thrice	35	48.6%	68.6%	0%	18.8%

Table 2

Statistical comparison of outcomes for probationary students who did not participate in the intervention program, who met with an advisor once, and who met with an advisor three or more times

Category	Participant vs. non-participant	Participant vs. met once	Met once vs. non-participant
Suspension	<u>p = 0.011</u>	p = 0.112	p = 0.072
Improve GPA	<u>p = 0.025</u>	<u>p = 0.004</u>	p = 0.191
Withdrawal	<u>p = 0.016</u>	<u>p = 0.000</u>	<u>p = 0.000</u>
Good standing	p = 0.765	p = 0.074	p = 0.054

Underline = statistically significant

### Discussion

The following statements may be made based on the descriptive statistics presented in Table 1.

1. Being placed on probation may act as an external motivator for improved academic performance. 43.5% of the students who chose not to participate in the program, the group unaffected by the intervention, improved their GPA's.
2. The combination of probation and regular interaction with an academic assistance advisor may be an influencer toward improved academic performance. 68.6% of the students who met with an academic assistance advisor three or more times improved their GPA. The difference between this outcome and that for students who met with an advisor once and that for students who elected not to participate was statistically significant.
3. The combination of probation and regular interaction with an academic assistance advisor appears to affect the propensity of students to withdraw. None of the students who met with an academic assistance advisor three or more times withdrew. The difference between this outcome and that for students who met with an advisor once and that for students who elected not to participate was statistically significant.
4. The combination of probation and regular interaction with an academic assistance advisor had a greater influence toward improved academic performance than probationary status alone and nominal participation with an academic advisor. Students on probation who regularly interacted with an academic assistance advisor were 28 percentage points less likely to be suspended, 25 percentage

points more likely to improve their GPA, did not withdraw from the college, and were slightly more likely to advance to good standing than students not participating in the intervention. Most of the comparisons of these differences were statistically significant.

Considering the age, race and sex of the students on probation and the levels of participation in the intervention program allowed the following statements to be made:

1. Racial composition of the total count of students on probation parallels racial composition of college (approximately 75% White, 20% Black and 5% Other).
2. Student race, sex, and age had no impact on the likelihood that students would have positive or negative outcomes in the intervention indicating a lack of biases in the programming.
3. Traditional students, defined as students between the ages of 18 and 24, are more likely to be on probation than non-traditional students. Traditional students make up approximately 55% of RCC's student population but represent 79.4% of the probationary student population.
5. Non-traditional students, defined as students over the age of 24, were slightly more likely to actively participate in the program than traditional students (36.4% vs. 31.8%).

In the coming semesters, the probation intervention program will be continued through the Student Success Center which was established in the fall of 2007. The data set described in this article will be used to inform and evaluate the continuing process of probation intervention as the Student Success Center serves both the students at RCC and the college itself. Positive outcomes for students in this intervention, like those described above, will result in positive outcomes for the college. They affirm the potential for positive influence on probationary students and the college through the academic assistance advising.

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