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# **“You’re kind of considered like a leper”: A Narrative Inquiry Into How The Significant Academic Struggle of Academic Probation Impacts Women Undergraduate Science Students’ Sense of Belonging at an Institution**

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*While there has been significant research on both how academic struggles such as being placed on academic probation impact college students, as well as factors that impact the sense of belonging for college students, there has been little research examining how a significant academic struggle impacts a students’ perception of sense of belonging at that institution. This qualitative study explores how an academic struggle impacts students’ sense of belonging at that institution, as well as other findings from this study.*

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Research examining college students who successfully obtained a degree after experiencing some form of academic struggle during their college experience is limited (Kopp & Shaw, 2016; Scrivener, Sommo, & Colorado, 2009). That which does exist is limited to case studies (Scrivener, Sommo, & Colorado, 2009), or studies examining the impact on a student leaving college with a GPA below 2.00 (Kopp & Shaw, 2016). The current study seeks to fill the dearth in the literature by undertaking a qualitative narrative inquiry of women students who have experienced an academic struggle and how they find and define their sense of belonging on campus after said academic struggle. For the purpose of this study, academic struggle is defined as being placed on academic probation as the institution where this study was conducted. At this institution, a student is placed on academic probation when their cumulative grade point average (GPA) falls below a 2.00 on a 4.00 scale.

### **Significance of Study**

While there have been multiple studies undertaken on how college students experience a sense of belonging on campus (Booker, 2016; Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014; Le, LaCost, & Wismer, 2016; O'Keefe, 2013), a vast majority of them have centered on various student identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). Yet

an individual's perception of their own cognition and intellect is part of their identity as well, often referred to as self-concept (Stangor, 2017). Research exploring this aspect of sense of belonging for college students has not yet been identified. This study explored sense of belonging by examining how students perceive sense of belonging in the aftermath of an academic struggle while in college. For the purpose of this study, an academic struggle was defined as being placed on academic probation while at a large, public, selective institution located in the Southeast United States. Findings from this study can serve to inform faculty, student affairs practitioners, and student success practitioners as they work with students experiencing an academic struggle to help them continue to cultivate a sense of belonging at their institution of higher education.

The purpose of this study was to explore the sense of belonging among students after experiencing the academic struggle of being placed on academic probation during college. In order to focus the study, the following research questions were utilized:

1. How do students who have experienced an academic struggle find a sense of belonging on campus after the experience?
2. Where do these students find a sense of belonging on campus?

3. What factors enhance (or impede) a student in this situation in finding a sense of belonging on campus?

### Review of Literature

While there is limited research on how an academic struggle such as being placed on academic probation can impact a student's sense of belonging and their overall college experience, there is ample literature that examines factors that negatively impact the academic efforts of college students. Factors that have been shown to negatively impact the sense of belonging for college students include insufficient self-efficacy [the belief that someone has the abilities to attain a desired goal] (Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005), ineffective student engagement [such as engaging with faculty and peers outside of the formal classroom environment] (O'Keefe, 2013), and lacking a sense of belonging at the institutions (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Experiencing adversity, such as being placed on academic probation, impacts the student both while they are enrolled in college (Cox, Dean, & Kowalski, 2015) and after the student leaves college prematurely and enters the workforce (Macfarlane & Chan, 2014).

Sense of belonging is defined as being able to relate to others and/or feel connected to others (Booker, 2016). Belonging is a basic human motivation and need

(Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2012, p. 8), and has been highlighted to be based on an individual's relationship to others, as well as others' relationship to the individual (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Research by O'Keefe (2013) has shown a direct correlation between students having an increased sense of belonging at an institution of higher education and increased rates of retention of students at those institutions. Inversely, a lack of having one's basic needs such as food, housing, and clothing met which are key requirements for an individual to have a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A lack of having their basic needs met has been shown to directly correlate with poor performance on tests and other assignments for students in formal educational settings (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Student affairs professionals are positioned to help students' sense of belonging in the aftermath of an academic struggle. Given that sense of belonging has been noted to be critical for educational success (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 11), the work of student affairs professionals in this realm plays a key part in the mission of higher education to effectively educate students by supporting the students during this time of transition brought on by the academic struggle.

An additional benefit of promoting a sense of belonging for students that struggle academically and wind up placed on academic probation is an increased likelihood of

the students being retained at the institution. In turn, this also increases the likelihood of ultimate academic success for these students. Being in an institution where one has a sense of belonging can drive a student's behaviors to achieve academic norms and 'success' (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 19). Sense of belonging is critical to understand for students who perceive themselves as at the margin of campus life (Hurtando & Carter, 1997), and must be considered students who are placed on academic probation.

Belonging has been explored in various populations on college campuses, including Asian American students (Wells & Horn, 2015), graduate students (Le, LaCost, & Wismer, 2016), Native American students (Strayhorn et al., 2016), and students coming from working-class backgrounds (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). In spite of the range of research completed thus far, there has been little examination of how college students develop a sense of belonging when they struggle academically. This is a glaring gap, particularly since Strayhorn (2012) mentions cognition (specifically how an individual assesses their position and/or role to a group) as a key feature to achieve a sense of belonging in college students (p. 17). Experiencing an academic struggle would likely impact a student's perception of their sense of belonging with their peers. An academic struggle could be perceived by the student

as a sign that they are not equal to their peers cognitively and thus may impact their sense of belonging at the institution.

## Methodology

### Epistemological Stance

This study was interpretivist in nature, specifically drawing upon the lens of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry serves to gain understanding of the lived experiences of individuals, as well how those individuals make meaning of those particular experiences (Patton, 2002). Studies using narrative inquiry tend to be focused on a specific point or period in the lives of the study participants (Leiblich et al., 1998). An additional benefit of narrative inquiry is that it supports "exploration of the participants' experiences in order to better understand and structures of environmental conditions used to make meaning" (Schoper, 2011, p. 60).

### Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was particularly beneficial for this study, as it focuses on the experiences of the individuals participating in the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It allowed the participants to share their unique stories and experiences. Storytelling "is the primary way we express what we know and who we are" (Kim, 2016, p. 9). Additionally, narrative inquiry provides insight as it allows

for the study participants to make meaning of their past experiences through the sharing of these experiences with the researcher (Clan-dinin & Connelly, 2000)

### **Sample Size and Participant Selection**

The target sample size for this study was between five and eight individuals. This number was chosen as it allowed for a sufficient number of participants to provide a deep, rich knowledge of the experience (Beitin, 2012; Kim, 2016), while also recognizing the likely limited number of students who would fit the study selection criteria within the chosen college. While a target sample size was selected, data collection was done until data saturation was obtained. The target population for this study was undergraduate students experiencing an academic struggle. For the purpose of this study, an academic struggle was defined as being placed on academic probation. Academic probation was chosen as the marker as it is clearly defined as being when the student's cumulative GPA falls below a 2.00.

Participants were identified through the help of administrators in a college as part of a unit broadly focused on agriculture programs. This specific college was chosen due to this academic unit recently starting a student mentoring program whose mission is to support students facing academic probation and/or academic dismissal. This included

hiring an academic coach at the college specifically to mentor and support students placed on academic probation. Students were contacted via e-mail after they had been identified with the assistance of the Deans Office of the college. Participation in the study was voluntary and did not impact the students' placement, duration, or status at the institution. In addition to this recruitment effort, snowball sampling was used when interviewing students to identify additional students that fit the study criteria. Snowball sampling is a recruitment method where the researcher asks recruited participants if they know of other individuals that meet the study criteria (particularly subjects that are difficult to access or find due to the selection criteria), then attempts to contact and recruit additional participants via current participants (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017) Informed consent was obtained prior to any participant being enrolled in the study.

To start off, a very short description of each of the study participants will help to highlight their background and identities. These stories were crafted from the interview transcripts, short questionnaires, listening to the audios of the interviews while drafting the story for that particular participant, and any thoughts noted by the researcher either during the interview (using notes taken during the interview) or from notes taken while memoing after the interview. Doing this

allows for the individual narratives to be highlighted and acknowledged, while also helping to set the stage for themes and findings that are common across multiple students' experiences. Pseudonyms, combined with other efforts to ensure privacy, were used for each of the participants to provide anonymity and help them to express themselves more freely during the interview. It is worth noting that while some participants had already come off of academic probation within the last year, others still were on academic probation at the time of their participation in this study.

**Alyssa:** Alyssa identifies as a biracial woman who is both Black and Hispanic. She is a first-generation college student, came up through the foster care system, and was previously diagnosed with a learning disability. Due to limited financial support from her family, Alyssa frequently worked multiple jobs to support herself while in college. Alyssa is the only one of the study participants that had graduated from the institution at the time of the interview, having received her bachelor's degree in animal science the prior semester.

**Blaire:** Blaire identifies as a Black woman currently majoring in environmental resource sciences. Prior to attending college, she grew up in the suburbs of a large metropolitan city in the Southeast United States. When she started her academic career at the institution, she entered wanting to eventually

become a veterinarian. Given her academic struggles, she was reassessing those career goals at the time of her interview. She had completed her second year of college at the institution at the time of her interview for this study.

**Carly:** Carly identifies as a Black woman, the second of four children from parents who are now divorced. She grew up in the urban center of a large city located in the Southeast United States. Throughout her entire time at the institution, she has been an animal science major. She is a relatively unique first-generation student due to the fact that both of her parents started college after she initially enrolled in college.

**Jennifer:** Jennifer is a Black woman from a well-educated family, with her mother and several other members of her extended family having completed graduate education. For much of her childhood, she grew up in the suburbs of a large city located in the Southeast United States. She attended a small, public, four-year institution for two years prior to transferring to her current institution. At the time of the interview, she was majoring in animal science with an emphasis on equine science management. Part of her decision to transfer to her current institution was her desire to attend vet school, though her academic struggle has her reconsidering that long-term career goal.

Rose: Rose is a White woman from a small town in a rural part of the Southeast United States. In her last year of high school, she elected to take dual enrollment courses at a small local two-year public school and continued there for another year after graduating from high school to complete her associate's degree. Upon completion of that degree, she transferred to her current institution, where she is majoring in animal science. She commutes multiple hours each day to and from her childhood home in order to attend classes at her current institution.

### **Data Collection Method**

Data was collected in two ways. The primary means of collecting information was through semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. In-depth interviews are frequently used in narrative studies (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Each participant may experience the situation differently, which is why multiple participants were interviewed. Interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed in order to facilitate effective analysis of the data. Interviews were anticipated to be approximately one hour in length, though the length of time for each interview averaged 40 minutes. In addition to the interviews, information about the study participants was collected by having the participants complete an information sheet containing various demographic questions. This sheet was given to

the participants when they emailed the researcher expressing interest in the study, and the participants were asked to complete it prior to the interview, as was used in conjunction with the interviews to create the description of the participants above.

### **Data Analysis**

Member checking was done with each participant, allowing them the chance to read over their transcription to confirm their sentiment expressed in the interview. Once member checking was completed, the researchers began the analysis and coding of the findings. The researchers conducted an initial round of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Once the initial round of open coding was complete, a second round of coding was done by the researchers in order to identify emerging themes by grouping the initial codes together that were thematically similar (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout this analysis, the researchers looked for common themes and narratives that emerged across the interviews with various study participants. Upon completion of this second round of coding, the researchers then performed more in-depth axial coding on these themes to complete the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Saldaña, 2016), followed by peer debriefing and consultation with the other researchers. Peer debriefing serves to strengthen the validity and overall trustworthiness of the



research (Connelly, 2016; Spall, 1998), and has the additional advantage of providing support to the researcher throughout the process (Spall, 1998). This process for analysis allowed for the themes to emerge across the participants, while also providing structure to the research and minimizing any bias or preconceived notions the researchers may have had prior to conducting the study.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

Two of the three researchers had experienced academic struggles. Neither were ever placed on academic probation, though both knew they had been close to this being a reality for them. One researcher was serving as an academic coach at the time of the study at the institution where the research was conducted. Because of their position, this research was not involved with the data collection in order to avoid any potential (real or perceived) conflict of interest. One researcher previously encountered their own academic struggles as a former medical student who was not allowed to continue the degree due to struggling academically in the program; allowing them to be empathetic to the experiences of the students they were interviewing due to experiencing a similarly significant academic struggle in their own life. This empathy allowed this researcher to approach each student from a place of understanding. The researchers made notes of

any emotions, thoughts, and reactions they encountered during all stages of the research in a field log, and utilized these to ensure that the participant's experiences were privileged without the research being clouded by their own past experiences. Notes from the field log were not used in the data analysis. Awareness of this is in compliance with reflexivity in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

Being mindful of their own past experiences is something that is critical for the researchers to ensure that the quality of the data was maintained. When participants were being interviewed, the researcher conducting the interview was respectful and careful to make sure that the research participants' experiences and journeys are their own, and likely were quite different from the researchers. The researchers were careful to accept this not just as they were interviewing the research participants, but also as they were performing the analysis of the information in the transcripts.

### **Trustworthiness**

Various steps were undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. First, audio recording of all interviews was done to ensure participant's experiences were gathered accurately. Second, after transcription of the interviews, each interviewee received a copy of their interview with the researcher to verify

the accuracy of their statements. Feedback was taken and utilized in order to refine the transcripts. This process was repeated after the researchers had read, coded, and interpreted the data from the interviews to confirm the findings with each participant in the study. Throughout the process, the researchers debriefed with a peer in order to further ensure trustworthiness of the data. These steps are congruent with practices to increase rigor (and, by extension, trustworthiness) in qualitative research (Krefting, 1991).

### **Findings and Narratives Across Participants' Experiences**

Within this study, three narratives were found to be the findings across the study participants. A finding was considered to be a narrative if it was present in a majority (if not all) of the study participant's interviews. The three narratives that emerged from the data are: 1) "I have no clue where I fit in": Lack of Sense of Belonging On Campus Due to Academic Struggle, 2) "This isn't me": Perceived Loss of a Part of Ones' Identity as a Result of the Academic Struggle, and 3) "She never made me feel like a failure": Positive Impact of Key Faculty and/or Staff During the Academic Struggle. An examination of these narratives will be discussed below.

### **"I have no clue where I fit in": Lack of Sense of Belonging On Campus Due to Academic Struggle**

Participants highlighted that their sense of belonging on campus was negatively impacted due to their academic probation, though the degree to which they felt this lack of belonging differed. For example, Alyssa noted a feeling that she didn't just not belong, but that she was an outcast during her time struggling academically, stating:

In my personal college, I felt it (lack of belonging) a lot. That you know you're kind of considered like the leper once you go on probation. Even before I got into certain classes, it's like professors and TAs had already spoken. You already went into new classes knowing they already knew what your situation was, and it was like that expectations was that you weren't going to do well. Not everyone was like that, but certain professors made it very apparent like, "I know you're struggling. My expectations is not for you to excel in my class." That already puts you in a different mindset.

Specifically with regard to her major, Jennifer spoke of a loss of the feeling of belonging at the college, noting that:

I honestly didn't feel like I even belonged in my major, which, to me, is

astounding because it's like from the age of like seven years old, I'd always wanted to be a vet. That was my goal. I always told my parents that, I'm going to be a vet. I mean, I've done like anything. I've worked at a vet's office, I did this, I did like everything that you could prepare for and then I get here and I can't even get past the basic science classes, like those entry, those "entry level" science classes, I am struggling in them like, is this really what I want to do?

Along the same lines, Rose noted a general struggle to fit in at this new campus after transferring from another higher education institution:

I have no clue where I fit in. I have trouble fitting in in general. Okay. Because where I'm from, I grew up with everybody when I graduated from (previous institution). Most of the class I knew, and even if I didn't know them before I grew up with them, I knew of them because they were back to back with me. So, I have trouble making friends. I have no clue where I fit in here.

Carly highlighted how her perception of belonging on campus decreased while she was on probation. Most noticeably, she felt this decreased sense of belonging when most students were in classes and she was not,

noting "I don't think I would say that I had a place on campus...with being out of class that did make me feel uncomfortable seeing everybody else go to classes." Similarly, Blaire noted a change in how she felt in specific places on campus, more notably her chemistry labs. She commented that "it just felt like a different environment. Not that I didn't belong there, but just the feeling of, oh, you have to catch up to speed."

Overall, all participants noted a lack of sense of belonging on their campus as a result of their academic struggle. While the specific nature of this loss of sense of belonging differed in magnitude (be it campus-wide or focused on specific locations), or differed due to how much or little the student felt like they belonged at the institution prior to the academic struggle, it nevertheless is noteworthy that it was a shared experience for all of the study participants. Due to how the placement on academic probation and sense of belonging are quite interconnected, conduction of future studies would help in determining if the lack of sense of belonging at the institution or the placement on academic probation occurred first.

### **"This isn't me": Perceived Loss of Part of Ones' Identity as a Result of the Academic Struggle**

Most of the participants discussed a perceived loss of part of their identity as a result

of their academic struggle. The specific identity that they felt they had lost (or partially lost) was their identity of being a successful student. Blaire noted that she would see “the success of others around me, and I’m comparing myself (to them). I’m like, okay, well I know I’m smart... (after the academic struggle), it was more so I kind of felt discouraged.” Similarly, Alyssa noted that “it’s something I would say is a scar.” Be it through the internal scars or the comparing oneself to others, the academic struggle negatively impacted the perception of some of the participant’s identity as a successful student.

Similarly, Jennifer noted she started questioning this part of her identity after transferring to the institution:

So once I got here and I’m like, and I started backsliding, I’m like, this isn’t me. I don’t know what’s going on. What’s happening? Am I dumb? Am I actually supposed to be here? And it just like almost all the time I would think about it and I knew it got bad once I started having dreams about my academics. I was like, this has gotten bad.

Jennifer’s situation continued to worsen during her first semester at the institution after her transfer, requiring her to reach out to a mental health professional:

So I got here my third year of college.... And started school in August.

By October, I wound up in therapy because I had gotten so depressed, so much anxiety. I was just... I didn’t know anything at that point. Like the one thing I always leaned on in times that were going wrong because I knew I’d always do well in school and now that was failing me so I felt like I had nothing.

While the degree to which each participant felt they had lost part of their identity due to experiencing an academic struggle, each of them felt it and discussed it openly. While this is perhaps due to the nature of the students attending this institution, it is worth noting that this change was shared by most participants and should be kept in mind by those that are tasked with helping students experiencing an academic struggle.

#### **“She never made me feel like a failure”: Positive Impact of Key Faculty and/or Staff During the Academic Struggle**

While all students found the academic struggle jarring and having an impact on their sense of belonging at the institution, a few participants noted how positive interactions with key faculty and/or staff members helped them through the academic struggle and impacted their perceived sense of belonging at the institution. For example, Alyssa reflected at length about how she felt repeatedly

supported over the course of her academic struggle:

She (the academic coach) was just very supportive from the beginning. She never made me feel as if I was a failure. She made me feel as if I could get this and even times when I messed up, and I had to sit out, she was there still constantly. She made sure even text message wise to be there, which she didn't have to do on outside time when I felt like I wasn't able to do good, that I wanted to give up....She just said, "This is something that you are trying to do. To continue to work at it." She just pushed me and helped me so much when professors were going against me where they felt when they actually said, "We don't think she should be in the college," (she) actually wrote letters of support to make sure I could get back into the school.... People get recommendations all the time, but people don't realize that when you're at the point where the school says, "I don't want you. We don't think academically you can do this, or we don't think you're capable of continuing this path," and to have someone to put their credentials who's not in your spot, who doesn't even know you, but believe in you and to write something

to make sure that of support the say that, "Give her a chance," that's something huge. A lot of people don't realize that's not something to (take) for granted. I don't take that for granted.... For her to put her reputation on the line and go against people that are higher than her to make it happen, to say, "You know what? I think you're wrong. I think that she can do this," it meant so much to me. She did that. The Dean of the college did that for me. And that was huge for them to say, "We believe in you," when others that did not.

Similarly, Carly highlighted how her academic coach (note: all 5 participants had the same academic coach when they were on academic probation) positively impacted her and directed her to additional resources that could be helpful to her as she worked to overcome her academic struggles:

(My academic coach), for one. Mainly because she was my assigned academic coach, so a lot of time with her. Some resources she gave me was the counseling center here, so I did that for a semester. That was very helpful. What else? Syllabus ideas, going through your syllabus, making a planner, study tips, trying to involve yourself with like minded people. Then using the resources they had to

offer as well, so testing resources, study halls, study groups, trying to form those things.

While not all colleges or institutions may be able to afford or have space to house an academic coach or other individual to support students who find themselves on academic probation, others can readily be there to support students. This support could come in the form of faculty, deans, academic advisors, and others that frequently engage with students. Helping students to be aware of the resources that are available at the institution and encouraging the sharing of information with students that are struggling academically can help the students address those struggles associated with being on academic probation while also serving as a way to positively impact the students' sense of belonging at the institution.

### **Discussion**

This study expands on the existing knowledge around sense of belonging by highlighting how a significant academic struggle (i.e., being placed on academic probation) can negatively impact the sense of belonging for female students studying in the sciences. In addition to these findings around how an academic struggle and a sense of belonging are linked, this study also found that a significant academic struggle can result in a loss of part of one's identity.

Research highlighting the importance of sense of belonging for a wide range of college students is robust and well-articulated (e.g., Booker, 2016; Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014; Le, LaCost, & Wismer, 2016; O'Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn et al., 2016; Wells & Horn, 2015). This study adds to this literature by highlighting that being placed on academic probation can negatively impact the sense of belonging for students, specifically female students. While the nature and/or degree to which female students felt they did not belong due to being placed on academic probation did differ, this theme was found in all of the study participants. Furthermore, the study found that some students felt they lost some of their self-identity due to being placed on academic probation. Given that a variety of factors can negatively impact a student's academic endeavors in college (e.g., 2014; O'Keefe, 2013; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005), having research that demonstrates how an academic struggle negatively impacts a female student's sense of belonging at the institution can serve as the foundation upon which supports and structures for these students can be built on by the institution. The study findings noted that key staff and/or faculty can positively impact students who are placed on academic probation. Be it directing the students to resources that were available to

them, to drafting letters of support for the student to remain at the institution, to even just believing in the student, supporting the students was found to be instrumental for the students as they worked through their time on academic probation.

A perceived loss of part of one's identity was an interesting finding. Specifically, the loss of one's self-concept. Self-concept, composed of one's cognition and intellect (Stangor, 2017), is recognized as a salient identity. While not naming this directly, a majority of the research participants mentioned a perceived loss of this part of their identity due to experiencing a significant academic struggle. This cognitive dissonance is one that students begin to work through as they experience academic struggle. It is possible that this loss of self-concept and loss of sense of belonging are interconnected, potentially in a synergistic way for students who are placed on academic probation (though more research will need to be conducted on this in order to determine if this is true). Given that the lasting impact of leaving college with below a 2.00 GPA is generally negative (Kopp & Shaw, 2016), having a significant academic struggle, such as being placed on academic probation, likely also has a lasting impact on these student's even when they are ultimately able to complete their college education.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

Throughout the interviews, the participants occasionally offered their thoughts on what would be beneficial for the college/institution to offer them and those in a similar situation. For example, Alyssa stated:

I think they shouldn't just have an advisor that's there when you're in trouble. There should be advisors that try to help you before you're in trouble. I don't think there's a lot of resources there. I'm glad that (my academic coach) came in my life, but I wish she was there before it got to that point. Many times I did reach out and say, "Hey, I'm struggling. Hey I'm having issues. I don't know if I can do this." I was told, "Go to a tutor." Tutors cost money. That's not available resource for everyone. "Go to the free tutoring." Free tutoring is maybe once a week if you can get in kind of thing.

As noted previously, participants noted the positive impact that the academic coach had on their experience as they have gone through the experience of being placed on academic probation. Research has shown that having more individuals such as an academic coach in the college (and across the institution) would be highly beneficial to those students that are experiencing a significant academic struggle (Allen & Lester, 2012), and help advise/guide students

through the academic struggle to get back on track academically.

Similarly, study participants noticed when faculty and/or staff reached out and supported the students in their efforts to overcome their academic struggles. This outreach by key faculty and/or staff was perceived by students as critical in keeping the student at the institution while working through their academic probationary period. When Alyssa felt like the institution was trying to push her out, her academic coach directly supported her in several ways, including writing letters of support in her efforts to be allowed to register for courses. Specifically, Alyssa noted:

People get recommendations all the time, but people don't realize that when you're at the point where the school says, "I don't want you. We don't think academically you can do this, or we don't think you're capable of continuing this path," and to have someone to put their credentials who's not in your spot, who doesn't even know you, but believe in you and to write something to make sure that of support the say that, "Give her a chance," that's something huge.

Having such direct, impactful support is one way that faculty, staff, and others who support students dealing with academic struggles can positively impact their lives

during these trying times for the students. Working with students, connecting them to resources, and offering support to overcome their academic struggles are but a few of the many ways faculty and student affairs professionals can reach out to students who find themselves in this kind of situation.

Given that this study is an initial look at how sense of belonging for college students is impacted by an academic struggle, there is ample opportunity for additional research along this vein. Different institution types, examining the experiences across a wider range of academic majors, looking at the experiences of graduate students in addition to undergraduate students, and how the amount of out-of-class engagement impacts both academic success and sense of belonging are all possible veins of research to further the body of knowledge on this topic.

As with any research, there are limitations to the study. Firstly, this study focused on students in one academic college at a large public state institution. Students at a variety of institutional types and studying a wide array of scholarly fields could have a different impact on their sense of belonging at the institution. Secondly, the respondents to the call for participants to this study all identify as women. Those who identify as men or as non-binary very well could have different experiences in terms of how academic struggles impact their sense of belonging, and



further research would be needed to explore this. Additionally, the sample size is relatively small for this study, given the size of the institution where it was conducted. While the researchers are comfortable in their analysis that saturation was obtained, a larger sample of students would address this limitation. Lastly, four of the five participants in this study identify as women of color. Having this shared identity could impact how they perceive their sense of belonging being impacted by an academic struggle, and further research targeting individuals with other racial and ethnic identities would further enhance the knowledge on this topic.

### **Conclusion**

An academic struggle certainly impacts a student's sense of belonging at the institution they are at when they experience that academic struggle. These findings suggest that in addition to the loss of sense of belonging, students also feel a loss of part of their perceived identity due to the struggle. Fortunately, findings also indicate that faculty and/or staff who reach out to and assist these students that are struggling academically can direct them to resources that may help them overcome their struggle, while having the additional benefit of positively impacting how the student feels they belong at the institution.

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