

## Operationalizing Narrative Theory in the Reinstatement from Suspension Process

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*Students returning from suspension remain a focus for institutions that aim to improve retention and persistence rates and graduate all admitted students. Institutions need more precise mechanisms to identify students who will be academically successful upon return from suspension and to know what support those students will need. Previous research has not identified dependable objective criteria for administrators to use when making reinstatement decisions. Review of subjective criteria in this process is required. This study explored the impact of student narrative on reinstatement from suspension decisions through the narrative theory lens. Student participants and administrators in the reinstatement process were interviewed to understand their understanding of the importance of student narrative on reinstatement decisions and future student success.*

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Students struggling academically at institutions of higher education can face academic suspension when their grade point average (GPA) and credit completion rate drop below certain thresholds. There is no one definition of academic suspension across U.S. higher education institutions. Criteria leading to suspension may generally be defined by low cumulative GPA (often 2.0 or lower on a 4-point scale), low course completion ratios, or unsuccessful completion of basic academic skills (e.g., English and math). Academic suspension can result in a student being required to take time away from pursuing their degree program, anywhere from a semester to a calendar year. Certainly, academic suspension can impact a student's ability to complete their degree program in a timely fashion, or at all.

Research has not identified objective criteria that consistently help higher education officials

predict student success when returning from suspension. Such objective criteria might include GPA, high school standing, class level, length of suspension, and success of transfer coursework while suspended. Hall and Gahn (1994) provided one of the most comprehensive reports on the reinstatement process, describing the increase in written petitions for reinstatement that institutions of higher education were receiving with the increased enrollment of that time. They alluded to the significant time taken by committees to review these petitions and sought to identify objective criteria that could guide a committee's decision on whether to reinstate a student. They discussed the use of subjective criteria in the review process, as each review must be individualized. However, to make the decision-making process easier for the review committee, they identified objective criteria from the student's record. In the end, they found that higher cumulative GPAs and transfer GPAs (while suspended) predicted student success. They also eliminated other criteria previously assumed to predict success. Though this research did not detail what was included in the student petitions or what subjective criteria were considered in the review process, the authors concluded that incentive and motivation may influence a student's likelihood of succeeding. Hall and Gahn (1994) recommended personal interviews as part of the reinstatement process, suggesting that this narrative process would highlight the subjective factors not immediately apparent within student record data.

Wang and Pilarzyk (2009) researched student swirl—the transitory nature of student enrollment each term between institutions—especially related to nontraditional students on post-suspension success. Swirl is predicated by nonacademic, environmental factors: work-life balance, financial challenges, and health concerns. The researchers wanted to determine whether retention initiatives alone or combined with external factors had a positive impact on GPAs after readmission. This

research highlighted the need to qualify institutional data with survey data that gave the researchers better insight into the students' lives and the factors that could impact their academic success.

Additionally, Cogan (2011) reviewed reinstatement research back to the 1950s, finding inconsistent and conflicting results. Cogan found that rather than predicting success, he could better predict student failure using quality point deficit. Quality point deficit represents the number of grade points below the cumulative 2.0 GPA and reflects the amount of effort required to regain good academic standing by raising one's GPA back to the 2.0 required minimum. Cogan suggested using quality point deficit to identify students at risk for failure to guide them into early intervention programs, concluding that "this knowledge, combined with interviews, recommendations, and other factors, may be used to make sound decisions to improve the probability of a student to succeed" (2011, p. 401). This research left open the possibility that review of qualitative data, including student narrative as found through "interviews, recommendations, and other factors," may provide additional, better indicators for future student success after reinstatement (2011, p. 401).

Little research explores student narrative as part of the reinstatement process. When applying for reinstatement from suspension, students often provide a written appeal making a case for their reinstatement; they may be asked to speak with a process administrator to discuss their appeal. Written appeals and in-person interviews provide critical personal narrative for those making reinstatement decisions. What is unclear is whether the content or quality of the student narrative impacts an institution's decision for reinstatement or how it predicts subsequent student success. Narrative theory provides a theoretical model that offers a better method for understanding suspended students, what got them to where they are, and what support they may need for future success.

### Theoretical Framework

No definitive objective criteria have been identified to assist higher education officials in making decisions and predicting success as a result of reinstatement. Research recommendations tend to focus on advising provided to students in suspension and reinstatement processes and the support reinstated students receive (Dill

et al., 2010; Drake, 2011; Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Wang & Pilarzyk, 2009). Academic advisors participate in the reinstatement process. They help students navigate the academic standing process. They discuss how students' goals, interests, and values intersect with their chosen academic programs. They connect with students on how their decisions and behaviors impact their ability to complete their academic programs. Academic advisors often help facilitate the reinstatement process. They are critically positioned to help students understand what is required to be successful, connect them with resources that support their success, and make meaning of their educational experiences.

Academic advisors have many theories and practices that guide their work, including "engaging students in reflective conversations about educational goals, teaching students about the nature of higher education, and provoking student change toward greater levels of self-awareness and responsibility" (Himes, 2014, p. 6). Most theories used in academic advising are based in the social sciences. Fisher (1989) described social science-based theories as Cartesian: seeking either/or predictive knowledge. Social science-based theories, Fisher stated, "are, or at least can be interpreted as, various ways to account for *how* people come to adopt stories that guide behavior" (p. 86). What narrative theory offers over social science theories, Fisher argued, is a logic for assessing stories. Specifically:

The precise way in which the narrative paradigm goes beyond such traditional social-scientific theories is in introducing the concept of narrative rationality. This concept provides principles—probability and fidelity—which are considerations for judging the merits of stories, whether one's or another's. (p. 87–88)

The use of narrative theory in academic advising is not new. Advisors engage in student narrative daily, hearing stories from students and telling stories to deliver important messages and guidance. Advisors also interpret student narratives to find congruence with stories they have known to be successful and those that have not. Narrative theory can provide a framework for reviewing student stories to understand the whole student—their background, their view on education, and their definition of success—all of which may

impact the student's ability to complete their degree program.

Without student narrative, an advisor cannot assess where a student is developmentally, whether the student's motivations are extrinsic or intrinsic, or how the student is synthesizing and reflecting on their education. "Where the narrative paradigm goes beyond these theories is in providing a 'logic' for assessing stories," (Fisher, 1989, p. 87). Narrative theory acts as a bridge across these philosophies where student narrative and its interpretation are key to understanding each student, their identities, and how they are making meaning of their education.

Research has connected the importance of narrative theory to the practice of advising (Champlin-Scharff, 2010; Champlin-Scharff & Hagen, 2013; Hagen 2008; Himes, 2014; Jordan, 2000; Pizzolato, 2006). However, no research directly connects the importance of the theory to the reinstatement process or predicting future student success. This research will examine how narrative theory can be employed through the initial suspension process, review of the written appeal for reinstatement, making connections with students about their goals and motivations, and helping students make meaning of their educational experiences.

Advisors engage daily in "telling and hearing stories; we enact them and reenact them; we create them and destroy them" (Hagen, 2008, p. 18). Humanities-based theories provide an avenue for exploring the ever-changing narrative, or authorship, of our students as related through their experiences and as we engage them in reflection processes to make meaning of those experiences (Champlin-Scharff, 2010; Hagen, 2008; Himes, 2014; Jordan, 2000; Pizzolato, 2006). Interpreting a student's situation, however, cannot exist without their narrative.

The reinstatement process itself is a perfect test case for how narrative theory may be used to review student narrative along with student academic record information to improve the reinstatement decision-making process. No particular student academic record data have been found to predict student success upon return from suspension, thus this data alone are unhelpful in making reinstatement decisions. Supplementation with narrative through written appeals and student interviews provides decision-makers with a detailed story of what was happening in the student's life and the impact on their success. When student narrative is reviewed and interpreted as part of the reinstatement process, a decision can no longer

remain beholden to any specific objective (student record data) criteria. The reinstatement process is very individual to each student's situation, understanding what happened, what's changed, and how the student plans to move forward but is not formally recognized in any methodology for determining reinstatement decisions. Hagen (2018) identified this dichotomy of the desire to seek truth and meaning in data through scientific approaches as opposed to the interpretation, meaning, and understanding that is gained through narrative. He argued, "engaging in narratives may well be the most thorough and most efficient way that advisors have to come to understand the student before them and to be understood by the student" (Hagen, 2018, p. xvi).

Narrative theory was chosen because of the storytelling and the necessary dialogue that occurs during the reinstatement from suspension process. "The narrative paradigm proposes that human beings are inherently storytellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience" (Fisher, 1989, p. 24). The narrative of a student's written appeal and follow-up interview tells a story of that student's experience to help the administrator understand whether the student is ready to return and succeed. Students and administrators each play a part in the reinstatement process, at times working together to construct a mutual understanding of the experience. In a sense, students and process administrators are "deciding on plot, the nature of characters, resolutions, and their meaning and import for themselves and others" (Frentz & Farrell, 1976, as cited in Fischer, 1989, p. 64).

### **Study Purpose**

This study attempted to understand how administrators managing the reinstatement from suspension process perceived the importance of student narrative in their consideration and to identify what criteria or characteristics the administrators considered the most important in granting reinstatement. Additionally, this research examined how students who recently went through the reinstatement process perceived the importance of the narrative they submitted; whether they felt their narrative was heard, understood, and integral to the reinstatement decision that was made; and what characteristics the students felt were important to their success upon returning from suspension. The information collected provided a baseline from

**Table 1.** Student Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Race	How Long Pursuing Degree	Time Out
Student A	Female	White	7+	1 year
Student B	Female	White	4–6 years	>1 year
Student C	Female	Black	4–6 years	>1 year
Student D	Male	Black	4–6 years	>1 year
Student E	Female	White	1–3 years	>1 year
Student F	Female	Black	1–3 years	>1 year
Student G	Female	White	7+	1 year
Student H	Female	Black	7+	Still suspended
Student I	Male	Black	4–6 years	>1 year
Student J	Female	Black	4–6 years	1 year

which to explore aspects of student narrative in the decision-making process and ultimately develop a rubric to guide reinstatement decisions, intending to include both student record data and qualitative data from the written appeal and personal interview.

**Research Design**

The research was conducted at a singular, midsized, Midwestern public university. This qualitative research used personal, online (via Zoom) interviews with students recently involved in the reinstatement from suspension process and administrators who facilitated and made decisions on reinstatement. The data collected from the interviews were organized, reviewed, and categorized into themes for analysis. Because the reinstatement from suspension process is highly subjective, it was important to understand how the process itself was being interpreted by those who lived it and to interpret the themes that emerged to guide the development of a rubric that formalizes the use and interpretation of student narrative in the process. The questions guiding this research included:

1. How does student narrative impact student success in the reinstatement from suspension process?
2. How can information from the student narrative be included to help analyze and predict student success?

**Sample**

Student participants were recruited from those reported as having gone through the reinstatement process for the fall 2020 or spring, summer, or fall 2021 terms. Administrator participants

were previously known to the researcher through their professional role. Of the 96 students contacted, 10 committed and participated. Table 1 (Bowlus, 2022) highlights student demographic data. Eight females and two males participated. Of the eight females, four identified as Black and four as White. Both males identified as Black. All were transfer students with varying years of experience in higher education. Five of the seven colleges at the university were represented, and all student participants stated that they had declared majors. The female-to-male ratio of student participants closely met the composition of the institution at large. Nine students were reinstated.

The administrator participants included academic standing representatives, some of whom were professional academic advisors and some being academic deans who have final decision-making authority regarding reinstatement. Each administrator represented a college or unit within a college at the university. Table 2 (Bowlus, 2022) outlines administrator profiles.

**Findings**

Findings highlighted the importance of student narrative in the reinstatement from suspension process as perceived by both participant groups. Students understood the necessity of writing a compelling story to persuade administrators of their readiness to return. Administrators viewed the narrative as key to understanding whether students had reconciled previous issues and concerns, took responsibility for their actions, made changes, and had a reasonable plan for return. Congruence of the student narrative with academic records established fidelity of the student story. Thus, student narrative was found to be imperative to reinstatement decisions.

**Table 2.** Administrator Participant Demographics

Name	Role	Gender	Race	Years in Role	Average # Appeals Reviewed Each Term	Recommends/Makes Decisions
Administrator A	Advisor	Male	White	1 yr.	1–5	New dean, deciding together
Administrator B	Advisor	Female	White	4–5 yrs.	1–2	Makes recommendations
Administrator C	Dean	Male	White	4 yrs.	5–10	Makes decisions
Administrator D	Advisor	Male	Asian American	3 yrs.	1–2	Makes recommendations
Administrator E	Advisor	Female	White	3.5 yrs.	7	Makes decision with committee
Administrator F	Advisor	Male	Middle Eastern	1 yr.	5–6	Makes recommendations, reviews with dean to make decision
Administrator G	Dean	Male	White	3.5 yrs.	3–6	Makes decisions

### Student Participants

Interviews with students elicited four themes. The first theme denoted a complex and confusing reinstatement process, as indicated by eight out of 10 of the students. Though not explicitly stated, the researcher understood that students had to initiate the process for reinstatement and often did not know where to start. When they did make contact, students were frequently redirected or pointed to the reinstatement process forms. Connection with an advisor was generally helpful but also led to some misunderstanding or miscommunication. Some students further delayed their return to school because of the process. And the student who failed to gain reinstatement still did not understand exactly what she needed to do to return.

The second and third themes highlighted what students perceived as important to include in their narratives. Although all the students recognized they needed to write a compelling story to convince administrators of their readiness to return, it was not an easy process, especially when they felt obligated to reveal personal, intimate details of their lives to people they did not know. Some of the vulnerability stemmed from not knowing how much detail to provide or whether the reasons the student provided would be relatable to the reader. Four students stated that they would not have been so forthcoming with personal information if they had known on what administrators base their decisions. What students thought they needed to explain in a relatable, empathy provoking, reasonable way was

the truth about their situations, that they had taken responsibility for their circumstances, that they acknowledged the challenges they had faced, that they could prove they had made change, and that they had success plans in place.

The fourth theme indicated that students did not receive additional support for success because of their narratives. Five students stated that they did not or were unsure whether they received additional advising or academic success support because of the reinstatement process or the narratives they provided as part of the process. Once they *won* reinstatement, most support received was initiated by the students reaching out to advisors or instructors. The deeply personal process students went through to be reinstated did not transform their relationships with advisors, instructors, or available support resources outside of what the students themselves pursued.

### Administrator Participants

Five themes were drawn from the administrator interviews. The first theme corroborated the students' perception of a complex and confusing process. Every administrator interviewed approached the reinstatement process differently. While every administrator required a written letter of appeal, other documents included or evaluated varied. Three administrators included an interview as another way to collect student narrative. Who participated in the process and who made decisions (advisors, academic standing representatives, deans) also varied. The lack of administrative

consistency was the likely cause of misdirection and why students were bounced around when they initiated the process.

Theme two reinforced the importance of the student narrative in the reinstatement decision-making process. Administrators wanted to hear the student's detailed stories to fill in the gaps in academic record information where context and meaning were missing. How the students told their stories mattered. Stories needed to provide enough detail to resolve any questions the administrators had, and students needed to show that they had reflected upon their experience and learned something that would help them move forward. Administrators used information from written appeals, student records, and sometimes the student's academic advisor to gather the complete story.

Themes three and four highlighted what the administrators found most important when considering the student narrative in the reinstatement process. Theme three found agreement among the administrators that there was no one measure upon which they could make a reinstatement decision. Decisions hinged on the review of the student statement and their academic records. Administrators were more likely to approve reinstatement when student stories aligned with their records and when the changes and plans they put forth in their appeal letters made sense. In theme four, administrators considered consistency with academic records as necessary to establish the fidelity of a student's story. They sought reasonableness in the student's return plan to confirm that the student had made meaning of their suspension experience and knew what was necessary to return and succeed. Four administrators said they wanted to hear students say that they value their education enough to return and be successful. Additionally, administrators wanted to see some locus of control in the student's story to convince them that the student had taken ownership of their situation enough to prove their level of commitment to completing their academic program.

Theme five showed how student narratives could be analyzed to predict student success through the recommendations made in the decision process. All but one administrator used information learned about the students through their narrative to stipulate actions or recommend support services and resources for their successful return. They also used the decision letter to direct students to on-campus support resources but did not make those connections for the

students or follow up to see if the students had used the resources.

Tables 3 and 4 (Bowlus, 2022) highlight key statements made during participant interviews that elicited the identified themes and situate them as they relate to and help answer the two research questions posed: How does student narrative impact student success in the reinstatement from suspension process? How can information from the student narrative be included to help analyze and predict student success?

### **Comparison of the Findings with the Theoretical Framework and Previous Literature**

This research was guided by the framework of narrative theory as defined by Fisher (1989) that the narrative paradigm provides "a 'logic' for assessing stories, for determining whether one should adhere to the stories one is encouraged to endorse or to accept as the basis for decision and actions" (p. 87). While some research alluded to the use of student narrative in making reinstatement decisions and the importance of student dialogue with advisors or counselors once returned, nothing discussed the importance of the student narrative in the reinstatement process or analyzed the narrative in its decision-making process. The importance of student narrative in the reinstatement process is best described by Chapman (2004), "It is personal because it is about the author, often embarrassingly and deliberately so, even though the very intimate nature of personal writing and the visceral reactions it elicits can be both a strength and a weakness" (p. 98). Students are being asked to write about periods of their lives that may elicit shame, embarrassment, or past trauma and directly connect those experiences to their academic success. How much or how little detail they provide, or how they tell the story, impacts how administrators make reinstatement decisions.

Fisher (1989) noted that "the narrative paradigm proposes that human beings are inherently storytellers who have the capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience" (p. 24). This definition of narrative theory aptly defines the reinstatement appeal process. Students are obliged to tell their stories, the good and the bad, in a coherent and relevant manner that compels administrators to approve their reinstatement. Both students and administrators agreed that the stories needed to describe events as they happened, align with student records, and

**Table 3.** Findings and Key Statements as They Relate to Research Question 1

<b>Research Question 1: How does student narrative impact student success in the reinstatement from suspension process?</b>	
<b>Administrator Findings</b>	<b>Key Statements</b>
Finding 2: The importance of the appeal letter in the reinstatement process	I mean the students are really pouring out their heart into these statements so it's hard to look at it in any other way. (Administrator F)
Finding 3: Consistency and reasonableness provide the basis for decision making in the reinstatement process	It's contingent upon an individual situation. Have they identified what was preventing success before now and do they have a reasonable plan for changing those factors, so that there will be success in the future? (Administrator G) We have done that in the last year, year and a half, where we've asked student for some follow up information, but most of it would be probably the unmatched realistic experience the student had compared to what their letter and their reflection of what they thought happened. (Administrator A)
Finding 4: Locus of control is a key characteristic administrators look for in the reinstatement process	We're really looking to see that the student has been able to make changes to the things that have affected them negatively in the past, so whether that's finding more time and flexibility from work [Clear Goals or Plans], or being able to resolve you know, interpersonal or family conflict that maybe impacted their education in the past [Self-Reflection]. Or it could even be that you know they gone on taking classes at a Community College or another university and they've been successful [Initiative/Valuing Education]. (Administrator F)
<b>Student Findings</b>	<b>Key Statements</b>
Finding 2: Pressure to write compelling stories	You need to write a really good story . . . with really good reasons and a really compelling excuse for why your previous . . . attempt was not successful. (Student B)
Finding 3: Vulnerability	Yes, in general I did have reservations about being candid in my personal statement but felt it would yield better results than giving them a general overview and hope that they accepted my narrative. (Student D)

be relatable. While nine of the 10 students interviewed were successfully reinstated, their capabilities as storytellers were not assessed. They did describe, however, providing enough detail so administrators would have few, if any, questions about their desire and ability to return.

A student's storytelling capability can impact the success of an appeal based on the detail

provided and whether administrators find the narrative helpful in interpreting the story behind student academic records. Perhaps this is a weakness of the reinstatement process where students are being asked to utilize a skill set they have not yet refined. Although students are often provided writing prompts, they receive little other guidance. Chapman (2004) declared that "it's also

**Table 4.** Findings and Key Statements as They Relate to Research Question 2

<b>Research Question 2: How can information from the student narrative be included to help analyze and predict student success?</b>	
<b>Administrator Findings</b>	<b>Key Statements</b>
Finding 1: The reinstatement process varies across the colleges/units	We really need somebody to lead the group to be consistent [across] the university. The second thing [is] to stick with the policy and modify policy that are across the board, not just for one department. And also, education, because not everybody are [sic] on the same level of knowledge about the process. (Administrator D)
Finding 5: Using the student’s narrative to determine support needed upon return	To be successful, and so do they have that understanding now, or are they at a point where, if we allow them back and we support them they will be able to so maybe they’re not fully there yet, but maybe we can get them there. (Administrator E)
<b>Student Findings</b>	<b>Key Statements</b>
Finding 1: Inconsistent and confusing communication throughout the reinstatement process	I got confused at first. All I did was fill out the paperwork and I didn’t even know I had to really write a letter. And [I asked] my counselor, did I do everything? And she’s like, no, you didn’t write the letter. I thought the letter was just the basic paperwork that you had to fill out to get reinstated. I didn’t know you had to actually write a letter. (Student E)
Finding 4: Support for future success	Setting goals and weekly check-ins and things like that, but if somebody like me who tends to fall behind needs to be held accountable, who is going to be holding me accountable if it’s not me? (Student G)

crucial to give clear criteria in narrative assignments” (p. 100), including how much to write, what style to use when writing (e.g., APA, MLA, etc.), and what will be considered acceptable as part of the writing. Where a student’s academic future figuratively hangs in the balance, administrators are basing the student’s return on their skill set as a writer narrator.

The role of the academic advisor in the reinstatement from suspension process is complicated. This research found that academic advisors may gather and review reinstatement applications and sometimes meet with students to discuss the process or gather additional narrative. These advisors may or may not be the assigned academic advisor for the student going through the reinstatement process, but their role is a critical part of deciding the fate of the appeals. Previous literature supported this advising role by recommending students connect with academic advising to discuss a success plan (Berkovitz & O’Quin, 2006; Dill et al., 2010; Garnett, 1990; Hall & Gahn, 1994;

Kinloch et al., 1993; Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Wang & Pilarzyk, 2009; Wishart, 1990). Six of the 10 students reported their advisor guided them through the reinstatement process. Some advisors read the student appeals and provided feedback before they went to the academic standing representative. Hagen (2018) stated that “advisors must seek ways to help students make their voices heard and overcome any obstacles to recounting their stories forthrightly, without fear or oppression” (p. 27).

This research confirmed that probability and fidelity are important in making reinstatement decisions. Probability refers here to coherence or consistency of the student narrative with academic records. Fidelity refers to providing as much detail as possible and providing reasonable plans based on the student’s understanding and description of what happened and what changed.

Literature reviewed regarding reinstatement decisions focused greatly on objective, student record data (Berkovitz & O’Quin, 2006; Hall &



Gahn, 1994; Kinloch et al., 1993; Wang & Pilarzyk, 2009; Wishart, 1990). This research found that, while academic records were important, the analysis of the student record was key primarily as it corroborated the student narrative provided through the appeal letter. To be clear, no administrator questioned the fidelity of the student record. Rather, the student narrative needed to address the story of the student record. Where the student narrative and academic record aligned, the narrative was deemed reasonable and reinstatement appeals were more likely to be approved. The importance of the narrative in helping administrators interpret and understand what they were seeing in the student academic record does not support utilizing only objective data when making reinstatement decisions.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Data collected during this research and its comparison to literature strongly support the importance of student narrative and the impact it has on student success in the reinstatement from suspension process. Less clear is how information from the student narrative could be included to help analyze and predict student success. The students interviewed largely felt that they did not receive additional support based on the narrative they provided during the reinstatement process. Administrators did discuss stipulating some success factors in their reinstatement decision letters (e.g., expressing how many or what courses a student would take upon return and potentially directing students to on-campus support resources). Enforcement of the stipulations was not discussed.

Of note, no analysis tracked student success after reinstatement. Students returned to being students and administrators moved on to the next reinstatement appeal. Only if a student subsequently was suspended and appealed again for reinstatement did administrators consider whether their initial reinstatement decision for that student had been flawed. Providing more consistency and common practice to the reinstatement process across colleges could alleviate confusion and complexity of the process for students and provide a basis for analysis for administrators.

How student narrative in the reinstatement process should be assessed remains a question. Utilizing the framework provided by narrative theory, Fisher (1989) described five components in the logic of good reasons. First, consider whether the facts presented in the narrative are

indeed facts. Administrators considered student narrative to be factual when the narrative aligned with the student record. Second, determine whether any relevant facts have been omitted and whether the ones being presented are being distorted or taken out of context. If administrators discovered misalignment between the student narrative and academic record, they questioned whether information was missing and could be gathered from the student or whether the student was not truly connecting or understanding why they struggled. Third, recognize and assess the pattern of reasoning. A coherent sequence of events in which the student takes responsibility for their actions and reflects upon what needed change lends itself to an identifiable pattern of reasoning. Fourth, determine the relevance of the arguments intended to inform the decision are sound and are the ones that should be considered in making the decision. Reasonable plans for return must address whether previous challenges were resolved or managed, whether changes made were appropriate to facilitate success upon return, and whether the student addressed why they want to return. Fifth, whether the narrative told deals with the questions on which the matter is concerned. Students can tell a good story, but it must specifically address the academic challenges the student faced, what changed, and what plans they had in place to be successful. Any other aspect is irrelevant to the reinstatement process.

Key to the logic of good reasons is the assessment of values presented in the student narrative. Fisher (1989) argued that “because norms and values are social constructs, socially derived and maintained, one cannot assess them without at least the implicit involvement of others” (p. 110). In the reinstatement process, this is illustrated by the student appealing their case to persons unknown but knowing that those persons will be judging their story. Conversely, administrators are placed in a position to examine student narrative against their ideals (or those of their institution) to determine a student’s academic fate. The implicit involvement of both students and administrators is understood by both parties. The implied values of the institution are also at play. Students and administrators alike are obliged to uphold the institution’s values. Students do this by aligning their values with that of the institution to express their intent on returning to be successful. Administrators uphold the institution’s values by how they assess the student narrative against previous student stories that proved to be successful.

Using the narrative theory framework accommodates individuals and their unique stories as it does not prescribe that a story must be a certain way. Instead, it requires that those assessing the narrative consider the underlying values being presented. The act of assessing the student narrative also reveals the values held by the administrator. Several administrators conveyed that the reinstatement process is inherently subjective, which permits bias and prejudice because no clear guidance is provided on how to be fair and consistent in decision-making. Fisher (1989) acknowledged this as, “the intrusion of such ‘subjectivity’ is not a fault in a logic of good reasons. Instead, it is a recognition of the very nature of human communication” (p. 110).

### Implications of the Study

This research explored whether narrative theory provides a framework for assessing student narrative in the reinstatement process. Academic suspension and return from suspension are deeply personal experiences impacted by any number of factors in students’ lives. Those experiences and how students make meaning of them should guide the reinstatement process. Student stories, and how they tell them, are important to the academic process. When working from a narrative theory lens, advisors can lead students through the self-reflection processes that help them make meaning of their experiences as well as help them navigate a process for which many are not set up to succeed. Every student story will be different.

### Recommendations for Action

Based on the themes identified from the participant interviews and the findings of this study, the researcher makes the following recommendations for action:

- Make the reinstatement process consistent and less complex across the institution to eliminate confusion among administrators. A consistent, less complex process is less challenging to implement and easier for students to navigate.
- Connect students with their academic advisor at the beginning of the reinstatement process to help them navigate the process and understand how best to tell their story. This will foster dialogue and an increased understanding of the reinstatement process.

Connecting with an academic advisor at the beginning of the process may increase student confidence in the reinstatement process as well as feelings of belonging to the institution.

- Make sure students understand the importance of their narrative in the reinstatement decision-making process, presenting upfront what administrators will be looking for in the appeal letter so that students can decide and take ownership of what details to include in their narrative. Being unclear about what should be included in an appeal letter fosters emotional insecurity when providing such intimate details of one’s life.
- Provide students access to their academic records so that they can address what happened and when regarding their academic suspension.
- Utilize student narrative to develop a support plan for students upon return that is communicated both to the student and their academic advisor with expectations about how the plan will be executed or assessed. Follow up with the student regularly during the first term post-reinstatement to ensure the student is utilizing the support plan and making successful progress through their course(s).

The research supports using a common rubric based on the logic of good reasons to guide reinstatement decisions, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Bowlus, 2022). Using a rubric does not demand a particular answer but allows a student’s individual story to shine through. Administrators using a rubric would remain loyal to their values. Guided by the logic of good reasons, they would be encouraged to look for and acknowledge the values of the student. Adopting a common review of reinstatement appeals could be the basis for further analysis of student success after reinstatement. The rubric could be shared with students going through the reinstatement process so they know how their narrative will be assessed.

### Recommendations for Further Study

Previous research expounded upon the importance of narrative theory in academic advising. This research highlighted the application of narrative theory in a critical process—reinstatement—that determines whether students successfully complete

Figure 1. Rubric for Analyzing Student Narrative in the Reinstatement from Suspension Process

Rubric Component	Does not meet requirements (0)	Meets some requirements (1)	Meets all requirements (2)	Score
Fact	Narrative does not match with student record	Narrative mostly matches student record; some gaps or misalignment may be present	Narrative matches student record	
	Student does not acknowledge or accept responsibility for what led to their suspension	Student acknowledges what led to their suspension but does not accept full responsibility for their part in it	Student acknowledges and accepts responsibility for what led to their suspension	
	Student has not made changes since being suspended	Student has made some changes, but unaddressed issues still exist	Student has made changes since being suspended and issues leading to initial suspension have been addressed	
Relevance	Student does not acknowledge any gaps or misalignment of narrative with student record	Student acknowledges gaps or misalignment with student record but does not explain them	Student acknowledges and explains any gaps or misalignment with student record	
	Student narrative does not address potential for future academic success or resolution of personal struggles	Student narrative addresses resolution of personal struggles but not potential of future academic success	Student narrative addresses resolution of personal struggles and describes potential for future academic success	
Consequence	Student does not address what is needed to be academically successful	Student may understand what is needed but does not describe how it will lead them to academic success	Student describes what is needed to be academically successful	
	Student does not provide a descriptive or reasonable plan for success	Student provides a plan, but it is not descriptive or does not seem reasonable for success	Student provides a descriptive and reasonable plan for success	
Consistency	Student's plan does not align with what has been successful for past students	Aspects of the student's plan align with what has been successful for past students	Student's plan aligns with what has been successful for past students	
Transcendent issue	Student narrative does not elicit hope or possibility for success upon reinstatement	Student narrative elicits hope for success, but the possibility of success is unclear	Student narrative elicits both hope and possibility for success upon reinstatement	
	Student does not express any values of the institution or how they align with academic success	Student expresses some values of the institution but does not align them with academic success	Student expresses values of the institution and aligns them with academic success	

Note. A cut-off score would need to be determined. With a maximum of 20 points attainable, perhaps a minimum of 15 points would be required for reinstatement, where a student would need to meet the requirements for at least half of the specified components.

an academic degree program. Admission, program declaration, academic standing, scholarships, and financial aid are other key intersections where student narrative is collected and used, but perhaps not formally analyzed. Institutions of higher education have much to learn from the student narrative collected through these processes. Demographic data is gathered and analyzed to describe a student population; student narratives provide a more nuanced understanding of that population and its intersections.

More analysis on the quality of reinstatement decisions and subsequent student success should be studied. For example, analysis of the rubric developed through this research should consider ease of use, whether it supports student success in the reinstatement process, and if future student success can be predicted. Interesting to learn is whether providing the same or a similar rubric to students at the beginning of the reinstatement process helps students feel better about participating in a process that is deeply personal and could have significant implications for future success in their lives.

Finally, higher education enrollment is a national concern as is the desire to decrease the number of people with some college and no degree. More nationally oriented studies on reinstatement are warranted to determine if reinstatement itself is a barrier for students to return and whether formal acknowledgment and assessment of student narrative help institutions learn more about their students to support their continued success.

### Conclusion

This study is one step toward practical applications of the narrative theory framework in academic advising. These findings encourage further exploration of how the narrative theory framework can be applied to other aspects of advising to help institutions learn more about their students than what academic records provide. Academic advisors already know that our students are more than just numbers. But the stories behind those numbers have proven elusive and anecdotal. Narrative theory acknowledges the importance of student narrative and provides a framework for analysis. More systematic collection and analysis of student narrative through this lens can provide institutions with a more nuanced understanding of their students to best support their academic success.

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#### Author's Note

*This article is based on the dissertation completed by Bowlus (2022). No conflicts of interest exist. The author received their Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership from Minnesota State University Moorhead in May 2022. Research interests include narrative theory in academic advising, advising assessment, reinstatement processes, self-efficacy, goal setting, and motivation. The author thanks Dr. Jamaica DelMar, University of Arizona, for her thoughtful insights and review of this article. Correspondence should be addressed to angela.bowlus@metrostate.edu.*