

A Plan for Academic Success: Helping Academically Dismissed Students Achieve their Goals

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Abstract

This article describes a unique process which allows a select few students who have been dismissed for academic deficiency the opportunity to create a Plan for Academic Success (Plan), which, if accepted, reverses the academic dismissal for one semester. If the Plan is accepted, the individual student assumes responsibility for taking action to complete the required steps which will ultimately bring the Plan to fruition. The findings based on data from Fall 2002–Fall 2007 indicate that students whose Plans were accepted were academically successful and were retained at a rate consistent with the retention rate of the institution as a whole.

The College of Charleston (College) is a public liberal arts college with an undergraduate enrollment of 10,000 students. The College requires students to maintain minimum scholastic attainment standards in order to avoid being placed on academic probation; failure to meet these standards within 15 credit hours of being placed on academic probation may result in academic dismissal. Oversight of the academic probation process and decisions regarding continued probation or academic dismissal are centralized in the office of Undergraduate Academic Services. Students who have been dismissed for academic deficiency have the opportunity to meet with the director of Undergraduate Academic Services to discuss the circumstances that led to their dismissal. Most students Dismissed for Academic Deficiency (DAD) are required to leave the College for one or more semesters before they can re-apply and be readmitted. However, each semester a small number of students is given the opportunity to write a Plan for Academic Success (Plan), with the possibility of having their dismissal status changed to probation status. The Plan is unique to the College of Charleston, both in terms of its composition and the high level of self-advocacy and responsibility that is placed upon the student. The Plan has proven to be effective in terms of retention and graduation of students.

Background

At institutions of higher education, there exists simultaneously the need to retain students and the desire to set and maintain high academic standards. For more than thirty years, educators have written about retention and characteristics which may influence student persistence (Attinasi 1989; Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen 1990; De Los Santos, Montemayor, and Solis 1980; Bean and Metzner 1985; Nora 1987; Olivas 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini 1977, 1991; Stage 1989; Terenzini and Pascarella 1980; Tinto 1975, 1987, 1988). Various models, typically developed to try to better predict indicators of student persistence, focused on factors that influence a student's decision to attend college and, subsequently, his or her choice of college (Carpenter and Fleishman 1987; Chapman 1981; Ekstrom 1985; Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith 1989; Litten 1982; McDonough 1997; Ortiz 1986; Paulsen 1990; Solomon and Taubman 1973; Stage and Rushin 1993; St. John, Paulsen, and Starkey 1996; Trent and Medsker 1967). Other models, drawing heavily on psychological and sociological theories, have been developed to explain student decisions to continue at the college of their choice after their first year (Bean 1982; Bean and Eaton 2000; Brower 1992; Eaton and Bean 1995; Peterson 1993; Stage 1989). All of these models, however, operate from the assumption that persistence is the choice of the student; none of these theories address the issue of students who are dismissed from the college due to their inability to meet the minimum academic standards of the institution.

Current Method

All colleges and universities set probation standards and hold students accountable for meeting these standards in order to graduate. When students repeatedly fail to meet these standards, they are subject to dismissal from the institution. Some institutions may employ a system by which students whose grades have repeatedly fallen below the minimum probation standards—but who demonstrate that they do have the ability to succeed—are given the opportunity to create a plan for academic success. The student is then held to specific tasks and behaviors enumerated in the plan, which typically include some or all of the following: 1) changing declared major to a program in which the student is more likely to succeed; 2) limiting the number of class hours the student is allowed to take based on the institution's probation policy (if applicable); 3) limiting the number of work hours; 4) using available academic and other support services (Learning Assistance Center, tutors, writing and math labs, etc.); 5) meeting at specified points during the semester with an advisor, dean, or other designated individual; and 6) achieving and maintaining a grade point average specifically calculated for the student based on their current GPA. While plan content varies from one institution to another, one component seems to be consistent among most colleges: the student is closely monitored to ensure that s/he follows the steps of the plan, and is made aware that s/he will be at risk for dismissal if s/he does not attend scheduled meetings, utilize resources, and maintain the specified work and class hours. Often, use of these services is tabulated by computerized tracking software, so reports of attendance can be generated on a regular basis for the supervising individual.

Proposed Method

Herein lies a significant difference between the Plan for Academic Success (Plan) created by the office of Undergraduate Academic Services at the College of Charleston and plans offered by other colleges and universities. Drawing from the work by Bandura (1986, 1997), in which he argues the relationship between self-efficacy (a person's own perception of his or her ability to carry out actions necessary to achieve a certain outcome) and student motivation for success, the College created a plan that requires self-efficacy. Although the College of Charleston's plan does contain similar components to the current method, the distinction is that the student is totally responsible for making the decision whether to follow through and seek the help that is available. Of course, faculty and staff members who are involved in the process may—and certainly do—encourage and support the student and may from time to time suggest s/he utilize services and schedule appointments, but the student's academic fate is not based on participation in these supplemental academic support services; it is solely determined by the final grades, which are posted at the end of the semester. Throughout the process of creating the Plan, the student must learn to take responsibility for his or her actions and must have the drive and the initiative to want to succeed. By the end of the process, the student understands that only s/he can initiate the changes that need to occur to be successful. The College of Charleston has been using a version of this Plan for approximately 15 years, but the current model has only been in place since 2002. This article is the first systematic review to determine the effectiveness of the process.

This paper will review the process by which a few carefully selected students are given the opportunity to write a Plan for Academic Success with the hope of having their dismissal reversed for one semester, thus allowing them the opportunity to show significant improvement in their academic progress. This paper will explain the purpose of the Plan, describe what students are both required to do and encouraged to do when given the opportunity to write a Plan and, finally, show the success of this process on retention and graduation rates for this subset of students.

The Probation/Dismissal Process at the College

At the College of Charleston, individual schools and the deans of the schools are not involved in reviewing students on academic probation to determine whether students will be allowed to continue or be dismissed due to Academic Deficiency (DAD). There is no appeal process for DAD; instead, students who are dismissed are encouraged to schedule an appointment to meet with the Director of Undergraduate Academic Services to discuss their dismissal and to explain why they have had such difficulty.

Students on academic probation are notified of their academic status by an email from the registrar's office at the end of every fall and spring semester and are provided with a number of links to campus resources that may be of help to them. These resources include the Academic Advising and Planning Center, the Center for Student Learning, the Career Center, and the Undergraduate Academic Services Office. It is the responsibility of each student to seek help from these resources and/or other appropriate resources such as the major advisor, the Counseling and Substance Abuse Services Office, or the College's Disability

Services Office to assist as needed. (Information regarding probation standards and guidelines for the College of Charleston is outlined in Figure 1). Once a student is placed on academic probation, s/he is reviewed at the end of every fall and spring semester by the Director of Undergraduate Academic Services; the number dismissed at the end of every fall and spring semester ranged from 79 to 178 from fall 2002 through fall 2007 with an average of 113 students dismissed at the end of the fall and 121 dismissed at the end of the spring semesters. The numbers include students who have been academically dismissed for the first time, the second time, and who were readmitted with a GPA under 2.00 and were under a contract to achieve a specific GPA each semester in order to raise their cumulative GPA to 2.00. On average, approximately two-thirds of the students dismissed at the end of the fall or spring semester schedule appointments with the director of Undergraduate Academic Services to discuss their circumstances.

College of Charleston Probation Procedure
<p>When students receive electronic notification they are on academic warning, academic probation, or that they have been academically dismissed, they are directed to the Undergraduate Academic Services web page which has links to pages regarding Academic Standards and Academic Resources. The Academic Standards provides the information regarding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the minimum scholastic standard required to avoid being placed on academic warning or probation; • general information and requirements for students who have been placed on academic probation; • academic probation FAQs for students (or parents, advisors, faculty, etc.); • information about academic dismissal; and • information about applying for readmission once the dismissal period is over. <p>The page also provides links so students can get academic help from campus offices, use the GPA calculators to determine the GPA needed to achieve academic good standing, and links to Useful Information regarding the College's Learning Strategies course and general information regarding learning styles.</p>

Figure 1. College of Charleston Probation Details listed as “Academic Standards” on the web page (<http://undergrad.cofc.edu/academic-standards/index.php>).

The vast majority of the DAD students at the College of Charleston identify their reason(s) for lack of academic success as one or more of the following: not taking school seriously, poor attendance in some/all courses, working too many hours, not taking advantage of available resources, substance use/abuse, immaturity, poor time management, difficulty making the transition from high school to college or from their previous college or university, and personal issues or concerns that distracted them. The Director of Undergraduate Academic Services will not extend the opportunity for those DAD students to use the Plan; however, the director will offer

the opportunity to write a Plan for Academic Success (see Figure 2) for the following category of students. A relatively few students each semester (perhaps 5-15) are on the borderline of possible academic success. Typically the student is capable of academic success but is in the wrong major (and poor grades in the major courses are pulling down the grade point average), or s/he had (and can document) unusual mitigating circumstances that typically affected one or two semesters but resulted in such low grades that s/he may have not been able to recover without assistance. Examples of these include a previously undiagnosed learning disability, serious physical illness, serious victimization and possible subsequent trauma, or significant personal or family problems which have now been resolved but dramatically affected the student's ability to focus on school. As both Astin (1998) and Upcraft (1996) have noted, significant percentages of today's college students have serious personal issues or experience emotional distress which affect their ability to succeed academically.

Plan for Academic Success

1. Your written plan for academic success (word processed in good form with perfect spelling and grammar) is due by _____. You need to do a very good job ("A" work) on this – your academic future depends on this plan being well written, thorough, and reasonable. Failure to meet any of the expectations outlined in this contract will result in a rejection of your plan and your dismissal will stand.

2. See an advisor in the appropriate major and determine appropriate courses for the _____ to meet graduation requirements.

3. Contact CSL (Addlestone Library, 953-5635) immediately. Ask for the "Managing Time and Tasks Packet." Follow the instructions in the packet exactly.

4. After meeting with an advisor in the appropriate major and after meeting with a CSL study skills instructor, you will be required to write a detailed explanation about why you had difficulty and what you are going to do in the future to avoid these problems. List specific things you will do to achieve academic success both overall and in problematic classes. Project how you will spend your time, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week during the semester.

5. Project your transcript for all the classes you propose to take, semester by semester. The GPAs must be accurately computed, as C of C computes them.

6. If a decision for reversal is made, you will be obligated to perform at the agreed upon level or you will be subject to dismissal again.

7. You must include contact information within your plan. You are responsible for picking up the plan once it has been evaluated.

8. Other conditions:

I have read, understand, and agree to the above requirements.

Name

Date

Email

@edisto.cofc.edu

CWID: _____

I agree to consider this student's plan for academic success if all the conditions of the above contract are met by the deadline. If the plan is acceptable, the student's dismissal will be reversed and s/he will be continued on a semester-by-semester basis so long as the student continues to meet the contract.

UAS Director

Date

Figure 2. Plan for Academic Success Sample Form

The Plan is designed to accomplish several things, including introducing students to appropriate individuals and offices on campus which can provide needed support and assistance, requiring students to reflect on and explain the reason(s) they have not been academically successful and what they did (or did not do) when they realized they were having academic problems, requiring students to review how they must plan to manage their time, and requiring students to project the courses they hope to take for a specified number of semesters and the grades they believe they will earn so they can see exactly how long it will take to reach academic good standing and the quality of work required to raise their cumulative GPA to the minimum 2.00 required for graduation. After meeting with the director of Undergraduate Academic Services and being given the opportunity to write a Plan, students must then meet with the Study Skills Coordinator in the Center for Student Learning, the academic support center on campus.

When the student makes the appointment to meet with the Study Skills Coordinator, s/he is given a "Managing Time and Tasks" packet. This packet contains a list of available resources on campus, handouts on prioritizing tasks, and a worksheet on time management. The student is instructed to read and complete the packet prior to the initial meeting with the Study Skills Coordinator. Typically, the student has 3-4 weeks to complete the Plan. It is critical that the student understand at the onset the high level of commitment and the significant amount of time that will be required in order to give ample time and attention to each part of the Plan.

As the student writes the Plan, there are several elements that s/he must address, including a self-reflective analysis explaining the recent lack of academic success and what will have to be done differently in order to be successful, a list of specific changes the student plans to make, a semester by semester listing of the courses the student plans to take as well as the grades the student believes s/he will earn, and, with the grades the students projects, an accurate calculation of the GPA so the student can see how long it will take and what grades must be earned to achieve academic good standing. The grades the student projects must be realistic, and the student is required to provide a short but honest rationale for why s/he believes s/he will be able to earn the grades indicated. Finally, the student is required to complete a time management plan indicating exactly how s/he will spend his/her time for an average week. This time management plan must indicate all work and class time, study time, travel time to and from home, school and work, as well as leisure time. The purpose of these tasks is to help the student gain a better understanding of what s/he must do and of the many resources available on campus to assist him/her. The Plan is designed to be a learning experience for the student, and students usually meet two or three times with the Study Skills Coordinator as they work through all that is required. In some instances, additional time may be needed for the student to meet with staff in the Career Center, Counseling Services, or a faculty advisor to discuss an appropriate major, as well as scheduling testing for learning disabilities and to apply for appropriate accommodations.

After meeting with the Study Skills Coordinator (and representatives from other offices, if required), the student completes the Plan and submits it to the Director of Undergraduate Academic Services for consideration. The Plan is evaluated based on how well written it is, whether the student

has complied with the instructions and requirements, whether the Plan the student has submitted appears reasonable, and whether the grades the student projects are realistic given past performance and personal circumstances, such as work and/or family responsibilities. If the Plan is accepted, the Director of Undergraduate Academic Services reverses the academic dismissal, and the student is allowed to enroll in courses for the next semester. Students whose dismissals are reversed are not required to meet with the UAS director nor are they required to meet with the Study Skills Coordinator; students choose whether they will take full advantage of the resources of offices and the assistance provided in various offices. At midterm, the UAS director reviews student midterm grades and contacts students via email to either congratulate them on midterm grades that indicate they will make the grades they projected in the Plan or to remind them of the grades they projected and that, based on their midterm grades, they are at risk of not making the necessary grades. Students are again encouraged to meet with appropriate people and to take advantage of campus resources, but no requirement is placed on them; it is the student's responsibility to meet with the Study Skills Coordinator as needed during the semester as well as take advantage of the academic resources available. At the end of the semester, final grades are reviewed and compared to the grades the student projected s/he would earn. Students who earn their projected grades are retained and are allowed to continue, even if they remain on academic probation. Students who do not earn the grades they projected are subject to academic dismissal.

Data

For this paper data was collected from fall 2002 – fall 2007 and analyzed to see how many students who were given the opportunity to write an Academic Plan for Success did, in fact, succeed. A total of 75 students who were given the opportunity to write a Plan between fall 2002 and fall 2007 wrote Plans which were accepted; as a result, their dismissals were reversed and they were allowed to continue. Of these 75 students, 62 (82.65%) were retained, 12 (16%) were not retained, and one (1.35%) student withdrew from all courses and left the College.

For students whose Plans were approved, retention is defined as meeting their projected GPA for the semester and thus being allowed to continue another semester. Current retention figures at the College for first-time, full-time freshman entering in fall 2008 was 82.9%, thus the retention of students whose Plans were accepted is consistent with the overall retention rate of the institution. Of the 62 students who were retained, 37 (59.67%) subsequently graduated, 10 (16.13%) are making progress toward graduation, and 15 (24.12%) have left the College by their own choice or were dismissed for failure to sustain academic progress.

Discussion

The retention rate for first-time, full time freshmen at the College ranged between 81.2% and 83.5% from fall 2002-2007 (Barclay, Smith & Reichert, 2009). Students who were dismissed and were allowed to write their Plan were retained at a rate comparable with the institution as a whole. These results are testament to the effectiveness of the Plan and to the changes that students chose to make as a result of writing their Plans.

The number of students who are given the opportunity to write an Academic Plan for Success each year is relatively small and represents students whose lack of academic success is based on extenuating circumstances and not just lack of effort. Students who have been dismissed because, by their own admission, they have not applied themselves or may not be mature enough for the freedom and responsibilities of college are not given the opportunity to write a Plan.

The students at the College of Charleston whose Plans are accepted and whose academic dismissals are reversed are generally highly motivated to live up to their promises. The unique element of this is that the responsibility for follow-through is entirely the students; at the end of the semester the decision of whether the student will be retained or not is based on the grades earned, not whether or not the student met with an academic advisor, the Study Skills Coordinator or the UAS director a specified number of times. As Bean and Eaton (2000, p. 52) argue, "Students who are academically at risk and who, despite past difficulties, begin to believe that they can succeed in academic tasks are more likely to invest the emotional energy necessary to achieve academic goals."

The students whose Plans are accepted succeed for a number of reasons. First, while writing the Plan they are given the opportunity to meet with people in appropriate offices and learn of services available to them; many times students report they were not aware of offices and/or services available to help them achieve academic success. Second, students are required to reflect on the reasons why they were not academically successful and identify specific changes they will make to increase the likelihood of academic success. Third, the students are required to assume the responsibility for their choices and their academic success. The students who are committed to being successful are the students who are motivated to take advantage of the resources available to assist them. This is consistent with Bandura's claim that "based on their understanding of what is within the power of human beings to do and based on their own capabilities, people try to generate courses of action to suit given purposes" (1997, p. 3). Bandura's previous research on self-efficacy has shown that when a person believes to have the capability to perform a given task and that the performance will then lead to a positive outcome, the person will be motivated to perform (1986). Finally, the faculty and staff who work with students as they write their individual Academic Plan for Success work collaboratively and often share information about individual students who follow through and work with the various offices. This collaboration allows offices to reinforce the importance and value of the many resources available to the students on the campus and is important to student success (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Moxley, Najor-Durack & Dumbrigue, 2001).

Implications

At the College of Charleston, those faculty and staff who are involved with students who write Plans are aware of and committed to the amount of time and attention that is often needed by these students, both while they are writing Plans and after their dismissal has been reversed. For example, the Study Skills Coordinator may meet twice a week with a student who is writing a Plan and once a week after the dismissal has been reversed. This would not be possible if the number of students who write Plans was significantly increased. If an institution decides to try adopting a model for a Plan on a larger scale, it may be best to do so as a part of a Learning Strategies or Study Skills course if the institution has such a course that students on academic probation are required to complete.

Further Study

While expanding the program for a larger population of at-risk students (such as students on their first semester of academic probation) is not feasible at this institution, it may be a place for further study. A research question could consider if these students followed the steps of the Plan, accessing academic and other support services and resources, creating a support system of faculty and staff, making an honest assessment regarding their lack of academic progress, would fewer students be dismissed for lack of academic progress in subsequent semesters? Some factors to consider for that option would be that students who are in the first semester of academic probation are not necessarily headed down the path to dismissal. Their lack of success may be linked to emotional, physical, and intellectual maturity, lack of preparedness, overindulgence in the freedom of college life, or any number of other factors. Students may correct these problems after being placed on academic probation or they may choose to leave the institution if they find requirements of the institution do not match their interests or abilities. An additional study could determine if creating an expanded Plan would be beneficial or inefficient.

If an institution considers replicating this Plan on a larger scale, the level of commitment of faculty and staff must be taken into consideration. An institution that wishes to use a version of the Plan for more than a small, carefully selected number of students may need to consider the following:

- ◆ What would be the criteria for requiring a student to write a Plan? Will all students on academic probation be given this opportunity or only students who have been on probation for two or more semesters?
- ◆ Which on-campus services would be required for a student to use while writing the plan?
- ◆ Which, if any, services/resources, and with what degree of frequency, would be either recommended or required for the student to access after the Plan has been accepted?
- ◆ Do the offices that would provide these services currently possess the resources (tutoring hours, professional staff hours, etc.) to serve students at the level of frequency recommended/indicated in each student's Plan?

Conclusion

The Plan is well received at the College of Charleston; it not only supports the college's general philosophy that students should not receive an academic "get out of jail free" card but should also be given an opportunity to succeed while keeping the cost containment relevant. Students at the College of Charleston who are given the opportunity to write an Academic Plan for Success and whose Plans are accepted are retained at a rate consistent with the overall retention at the College of Charleston. This model has worked well at the College of Charleston for many years, and we believe it will continue to assist students who were not successful become successful, thus helping them achieve their academic goals.

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