

## Chapter 5

## STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION

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*Academic probation affects all members of the learning community. The institutional stakeholders, advisors, and students form a partnership to support the student's success by focusing on his or her efforts to change the probationary status. Stakeholders define an institutional response and commitment to the probationary population while the academic advisor provides the critical link between the partners. In this chapter, Gehrke and Wong explore academic probation, detail possible responses (by the student, the advisor, and the institution), and provide information regarding the implications of these responses.*

### Introduction

The academic advising process has been identified as the crucial link between students on probation and the institution (Cook, 2001; Habley, 1981; Muskat, 1979). The literature illustrates the positive effect of academic advisors on the collegiate success and retention of students on academic probation (Backhus, 1989; Glennen, Farren, & Vowell, 1996; Habley, 1981; Janasiewicz, 1987; Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Molina & Abelman, 2000; Ramirez & Evans, 1988). A student with an institutional contact, such as through an academic advisor, feels more integrated and connected with the institution when compared to those students without such relationships (Earl, 1987; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Spanier, 2004). Tinto's (1975) foundational retention model shows that academic integration is a primary factor in preventing student attrition. Crockett (1985) concurred by stating that the academic advisement process is the cornerstone of student retention at institutions of higher education. The academic advisors who work with students on probation need to be aware of these beneficial connections and outcomes as well as understand the contributions of the institution, student, and advisor that create such positive relationships and results.

### Academic Probation

As they pursue their undergraduate degrees, students encounter many challenges and struggles. Not only are the young adult years a time of personal development and growth, they are also a time of academic advancement and learning. Almost every student will experience occasional academic disappointment, and the frequency and severity of this academic difficulty can determine the student's probable success toward graduation.

Typically, students with significant academic difficulties are placed on academic probation. Academic probation is the result of a student's cumulative GPA falling below a set standard, usually 2.0 on a 4.0 scale. Once placed on academic probation, the student experiences a decreased chance of obtaining a degree (Glennen et al., 1996). How the student reacts and handles the probationary status is a major determinant in her or his future collegiate success (Kelley, 1996). Of course, the student's reaction is often closely connected with the causes of the poor academic performance; thus, each student on probation must be treated individually. In addition, the academic advisor must address the student's complete situation (Gehrke, 2006) and recognize that no single strategy will help all students in their academic pursuits.

At most higher education institutions, academic probation is an emphatic warning that the quality of the student's academic work has not met the institution's minimum standards and that the quality must improve during the probationary period for the student to continue studying at the institution (Higgins, 2003). Kelley (1996) found that academic probation is usually necessitated by a student's pattern of poor performance in a wide variety of classes rather than difficulty in a single course. Gehrke (2006) discovered that poor academic performance

is typically a result of multiple issues (see also Earl, 1988; Siena College, 2003) that are often interrelated and that have collectively contributed to the probationary standing.

When a student's cumulative GPA falls below the criteria, the student on academic probation is notified of the probationary academic standing and typically given conditions that she or he must meet during this specified probationary time. The key condition is improvement of the GPA. Tools, such as a contract or agreement, may be utilized to help the student take the necessary steps to succeed and avoid dismissal. Students understand academic probation to be a bittersweet wake-up call that allows them another chance at the institution (Gehrke, 2006).

### Academic Dismissal

The academic dismissal policy differs by institution. A typical policy states that students who are placed on academic probation and do not improve their academic standing in the allowed timeframe will be dismissed from the institution. When the student is dismissed for the first time, the dismissal period may last for one semester (fall or spring). If the student is being dismissed for a second time, the dismissal period may be much longer, such as 3 full years. During the last semester of dismissal, the student may apply for re-enrollment for the subsequent semester. Depending on the institution's policy, the student may further his or her academic progress while on academic dismissal by enrolling in courses at different institutions or via correspondence at the home institution; however, to earn credit toward readmission the student must have completed those classes with a minimum GPA as set by the institution, such as earning a C or better. Failing grades obtained while attending other institutions can negatively affect the student's readmittance chances.

When working with students facing academic dismissal, advisors must be sure that advisees are fully aware of the institution's policies and procedures regarding readmittance and transferring courses. They should also encourage students to take the necessary steps during the dismissal semester(s) to resolve any issues that contributed to the poor academic performance. If needed, the advisor may provide guidance and resource suggestions to help the student with identifying the contributing factors.

### The Partnership: The Institution and Advisor as Resources

#### *The Institution*

The response to students experiencing academic difficulties is undertaken by partners: the institutional stakeholders, advisors and staff within the advising unit, and the student. The institution typically makes available various college resources to help students, especially those on academic probation, to succeed academically. Most institutions provide academic learning centers, counseling and mental-health support personnel, financial aid assistance, and career exploration offices. These resources, along with institutional policies and a culture that promotes student success and retention, contribute to the academic recovery and achievement of students on probation.

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#### *The Advisor*

The primary institutional resource available to help students on academic probation is the academic advisor. Academic advisors can assist students in choosing appropriate classes to complete the degree requirements, navigating the institution and its policies and procedures, and locating necessary resources and assistance as needed as part of the effort to ensure that students enjoy a successful overall collegiate experience. Advisors are available to help students explore goals in relation to academic talents and options. In addition, advisors relay the lessons learned by previous undergraduates to help other students avoid the problems that their predecessors have faced. Their suggestions may keep a student from becoming overwhelmed and misguided.

Although advisors are accessible to all students, many do not utilize their advisor's knowledge and experience until a time of crisis, such as being placed on academic probation. Advisors must understand this dynamic and take full advantage of the initial appointments with students to develop the strong trusting relationships that culminate through frequent, regular contacts.

### The Partnership: The Student in Academic Difficulty

By talking with a student on academic probation, an advisor may discover an entire host of reasons to explain the individual's academic struggle. Inexperience with navigating college and the lack of preparedness for college procedures and curriculum are problematic as are poor study skills, procrastina-

tion, and inattention to available campus resources. Students face the challenge of balancing life and school, and they find that college is very different than high school. In addition, an undergraduate's family and financial responsibilities change as does her or his personal responses to those potential stresses. In part because of the intensity of the collegiate instructional pace, when these or other interfering factors escalate and divert the student's attention to nonacademic priorities, the student is seldom able to regain the lost time and work necessary to catch up and succeed (Ramirez & Evans, 1988). Regardless of the specific causes or circumstances, the multiple struggles may be difficult to overcome and a student slides into academic probation.

### *Understanding the Student in Academic Jeopardy*

Because they may be the first people to identify a person in academic jeopardy, academic advisors must realize that the population of students on probation is not comprised of any single type of student. Often students on probation are referred to as *at-risk* students; however the terminology *at-risk* can be problematic when used as a descriptor of that group. It is correct that the student on academic probation has a greater probability of attrition, (i.e., at risk of not graduating). However, the term *at-risk* is also used to reference other student populations that are not necessarily in academic jeopardy. Specific combinations of characteristics constitute a student profile that may describe an *at-risk student*: ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic background; parental education level; and performance in high school. For example, a student who graduates from a high school where the alumni typically do not matriculate into college may be categorized as at risk. Similarly, a first-generation college student may also be termed at risk because of his or her limited exposure to the culture and process of postsecondary education. The first-generation student may also have limited support from family members who have little or no knowledge or experience regarding higher education. These examples of student situations may lead students to be termed at risk because they are entering the academy with a limited support or knowledge base; however, they are not necessarily struggling academically.

Students on academic probation may be labeled at risk because their low GPA places them in jeopardy of leaving the institution before graduating.

Other characteristics such as race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parental education level, and high school performance are not necessarily the predictors of a student falling into probationary status. Thus, academic advisors working with students on probation must identify the unique contributing factors for each individual's academic difficulty.

### *The Myth of the Self-reliant Student*

Those who work with undergraduates must also be aware that many students who find themselves on academic probation are not necessarily engaged with the partners interested in their success. Many students are not self-reliant and do not identify the need for assistance until it is too late. This lack of student independence or self-reliance is often not realized by academic advisors or educators who believe that a student will follow through with referrals and recommendations.

When a student is struggling, academic advisors commonly provide her or him with a list of specific services, such as the writing center and tutoring facility, which may help with the student's academic success; however, to obtain the benefit of these resources, as well as any advice or strategy suggestion, the student must independently follow through with the recommendation (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001). The student's action is voluntary and requires initiative (Heerman & Maleki, 1994) and a certain level of self-sufficiency. When he or she lacks self-reliance, the student may not take advantage of the recommended referrals and strategies, which is likely a significant contributor to the student's academic probation status and struggle.

Advisors who fall into the myth that struggling students can and will come for help and then follow the guidance offered to them will not be able to help struggling students effectively. Advisors and others undertaking institutional retention efforts must acknowledge the myth of self-reliance and be proactive in seeking out the students who will not come forth on their own for help (Earl, 1988; Himmelstein, 1992).

### *Student Characteristics Related to Academic Difficulties*

Though no specific type of student is destined to have academic difficulties and end up on academic probation, some identifiable conditions can significantly impact a student's academic performance. A

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