

Effect of Low and High Advisor Involvement on the Academic Performances of Probation Students

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While advisors can find support in theory and practice for assisting students who are performing poorly in academics, the optimal involvement level for improving academic performance is undetermined. We conducted three experimental trials to compare low- and high-involvement of advisors assisting probation students. The involvement levels for the low-involvement groups were identical, while involvement varied among those groups receiving the high-involvement treatment. We found a significant difference in academic performance only between the group that experienced the greatest advisor involvement and the simultaneously assessed low-involvement group. The results suggest that full institutional intervention is needed to effectively help probation students.

Personnel at all higher education institutions are concerned with college student academic performance. Consequently, almost all institutions have academic policies and procedures, such as academic probation, suspension, and dismissal (Kelley, 1996), to address poor academic performance. However, the level of advisor involvement with students who are in academic difficulty differs at each institution. Institutional involvement is determined by how college student motivation and cognition are viewed by policy makers.

Self-directed Student/Low Institutional Involvement

Many college staff hold the belief that postsecondary students have the cognitive strategies and motivational control to monitor fluctuations in their study efforts and behaviors, to learn new study strategies, and change their tactics and situations to improve their academic performances. Indeed, recently advisors have been encouraged to consider students as equal partners in their own development (Frost, 1991).

When students are viewed as self-directed, resources are made available and publicized, but students are left to seek out these resources independently and to follow through on the advice, strategies, and tools offered. This institutional response is inviting but restrained and might involve sending students letters notifying them of poor

academic performances, explaining the consequences of continued poor performance, and describing the available campus resources that can assist in improving academic performance (e.g., study-skills workshops). Those who believe that students are self-directed consider mandatory meetings and compulsory agreements to be demeaning to students and an overestimation of the institution's power to change students' study efforts and behaviors (Arnold, 2000). Proponents of the low-involvement approach believe that students who fail to improve their performances are either unready for college or are tending to noneducational priorities.

Transitional Student/High Institutional Involvement

Other educators view poor academic performance as the result of inadequate cognitive and motivational strategies that hinder students from adjusting to the challenges of college life. These conditions can involve both external and internal factors, such as unexpected course difficulty, relationship problems, and loss of interest in college (Weinsheimer, 1993). Because students are perceived to have weak or nonexistent coping strategies, such as help seeking, to address college-life problems, institutional involvement is high among students with academic problems.

While the high-involvement format varies according to institution size and student profile, some characteristics are common mediation techniques. In early interventions, students who exhibit preprobation behaviors and attitudes are identified (Kelley, 1996), and they are required to sign structured agreements (Garnett, 1990). The interventions are comprehensive and centralized, addressing the range of student needs through a coordinating office or program (Backhus, 1989; Patrick, Furlow, & Donovan, 1988). The interventions are also personal and student-driven, involving individual meetings with both faculty and staff as needed by the student (Arndt, 1995).

A high-involvement model includes not only notification of poor performance and resource availability but also required meetings with advisors who oversee contract-like agreements to use resources, promote activities to improve study

strategies, and initiate follow-up contact. Proponents of high-level institutional involvement believe that by affecting student cognitive and motivational state, the poorly performing student will change study behavior and experience increased personal fulfillment. As a result of these efforts, high-involvement policy makers believe that more students will be retained at the institution.

Study Rationale

Many studies support some kind of institutional intervention to increase academic performance and retention (Beal & Noel, 1980; Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Tinto, 1987). However, few researchers have experimentally examined the effectiveness of the different levels of institutional involvement in assisting poorly performing students; of those studies conducted, the results have been mixed. Robbins, Lorenz, Kidd, and Kessler (1997) randomly assigned students to high-involvement “intrusive” advising and control groups. They found no significant differences between the two groups’ mean semester grade-point averages (GPAs). In another experimental study, readmitted students who attended weekly meetings throughout the semester of return met grade goals with greater frequency than did readmitted students who did not attend the weekly meetings (Taylor, Powers, Lindstrom, & Gibson, 1987).

Because student achievement of full academic potential, institutional retention of students, and staff resource efficacy is important to advisors and administrators, comparative studies on advisor involvement with at-risk students need to be done. We chose to do an experimental field study to compare the effectiveness of low- and high-institutional involvement (hereafter “low involvement” and “high involvement”) of advisors who sought to improve the performances of students in academic difficulty.

We conducted three trials comparing students in low- and high-involvement groups. In high-involvement Trial 1, we implemented the most activities, which were directed at improving student academic performance. The students in the succeeding two trials were offered fewer activities but institutional involvement, as previously defined, was still considered high. The low-involvement group activities remained the same throughout each trial.

We predicted that in Trial 1 the students in the most-enriched high-involvement group would perform significantly better academically than would those students in the simultaneously studied low-involvement group. In the other trials, we predicted

that the students in the high-involvement groups also would perform significantly better than those in the low-involvement groups. However, because fewer number of high-involvement activities were presented to the participants of Trials 2 and 3 than were presented to those in Trial 1, we anticipated that the differences between the high- and low-involvement groups would be less than were expected in Trial 1.

While all students in each high-involvement group were required to meet three times with an academic advisor, the students in the low-involvement groups were invited, by letter, to meet with an advisor; therefore, they were given the opportunity to meet with advisors as frequently as those students in the high-involvement groups. However, we believed that students in academic difficulty would not seek help voluntarily and predicted that for each trial the students in the high-involvement group would meet with advisors at a significantly higher rate than would the students in the low-involvement group. In addition, we expected that students in the high-involvement group would find the activities very useful.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study had been placed on academic probation in the Arts and Sciences College at a large, public university. At the time of this study, students were placed on academic probation when they had attempted at least 24 credits and their cumulative GPAs were from 1.70 through 1.99 on a 4.00-point scale.

For each of three successive semesters, Trials 1–3, the probation students were randomly divided into two groups: low involvement and high involvement. Rather than evenly dividing the students into each group, for each trial we assigned 60% of the students to the high-involvement groups because we anticipated that some students would not want to participate in the high-involvement activities. Through this manipulation of sample, we anticipated that at the end each semester the low- and high-involvement groups would be of equal sizes as needed for effective statistical comparison. As shown in Table 1, the distribution between the groups was nearly equal, except for Trial 3, in which the high-involvement group was 40% of the total trial sample.

Nonparticipants did not attend any meetings after the initial contact and did not engage in any of the high- or low-involvement activities. The hold on their registrations was not a concern because they

Table 1 Number of probation students in the low- and high-involvement groups by trial

Students	Trials					
	1 (Fall 1998) N = 120		2 (Spring 1999) N = 184		3 (Fall 1999) N = 123	
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
By assignment	48	72	72	112	50	73
Not in study	7	36	17	63	12	48
Participants (n)	41	36	55	49	38	25

Table 2 Activities by low- and high-involvement groups and by trials

Activities	Trials			
	Low 1-3	1	2	3
Letter of notification	x	x	x	x
Mandatory meetings		x	x	x
Agreement to use resources		x	x	x
Study strategies materials/Web sites		x	x	x
Reminder phone calls		x	x	
Study strategies assignments		x		

delayed their registrations to the late registration period after the semester of intervention was over. These students were excluded from the study as were those who did not enroll or withdrew from all courses during the semester of the study. The higher nonparticipation rate for the Trial 3 high-involvement group was caused by students who both did not engage in the activities and did not enroll or who withdrew from courses. Student athletes were also excluded because they were served through an exclusive heavily structured advising program. We found students in the low- and high-involvement groups to be proportional in gender, credit class standing, and ethnicity.

Procedures

For each trial, each student in the low-involvement group received a letter notifying her or him of poor academic performance and explaining the consequences of continued poor performance. This letter also encouraged the student to visit any academic advisor on staff and use campus resources, such as counseling and learning assistance services. This letter was mailed out at the end of the semester in which the student's cumulative GPA dropped to below 2.00 and resulted in placement on probation.

Trial 1 for the high-involvement group was enriched with the most activities, while Trials 2 had fewer activities and Trial 3 had even less activities for student participation. Therefore, each high-involvement group received a different level of

advisor involvement. See Table 2. The high-involvement group activities in Trial 1 were based on the common characteristics of interventions by academic advising programs designed to assist poorly performing students: the letter of notification of poor performance and the high-involvement intervention requirements; mandatory meetings with designated academic advisors; an agreement to use certain campus resources, study strategies materials, and Web support; reminder phone calls for meetings; and written assignments on various study strategies issues.

The notification letters for both the low- and high-involvement groups were mailed after the semester in which the students were placed on probation. The mandatory meetings with academic advisors were scheduled prior to or at the outset of the intervention semester as well as at the 9th and 12th weeks of the semester. Students were informed that a hold on subsequent semester registration would be issued if students failed to meet requirements. Reminder phone calls were made before the scheduled meeting dates. Unlike the students in the low-involvement groups, who could meet with any academic advisor, the students in each high-involvement group were assigned to two academic advisors designated to serve them. Each of these advisors followed through with the same student over the required three meetings.

At the first meeting, the advisor reviewed the activities and assignment due dates, conducted a

Table 3 Academic action categories by GPA parameters

GPA	Academic Action		
	Suspension Dismissal	Continued Probation	Removed from Probation
Semester	≤ 1.99	≥ 2.00	≥ 2.00
Cumulative	≤ 1.99	≤ 1.99	≥ 2.00

Note. A probation student who fails to meet a minimum 2.00 semester GPA and has had a previous suspension will be dismissed.

Table 4 Number of students by academic action and low- and high-involvement groups

Trial	Academic Action Frequencies			Total
	Suspension/Dismissal	Continued Probation	Removed from Probation	
1 Low	25	6	10	41
High	12	10	14	36
2 Low	19	11	25	55
High	10	16	23	49
3 Low	21	7	10	38
High	11	5	9	25

Note. Differences in Trial 1 were significant ($p < 0.10$). No significant differences were found in the other trials.

brief assessment of the student's problems (upon which an agreement to use appropriate resources was made), and distributed the study strategies materials and Web support information. At the second and third meetings, the assignments were discussed, as were problems impeding the student's academic progress. Also at the third meeting, registration for the following semester was discussed.

For Trials 2 and 3, high-involvement activities were the same as those in Trial 1; however, written assignments were omitted for Trial 2, and both the written assignments and the reminder phone calls were omitted in Trial 3. The written assignments and the reminder phone calls were omitted because they required a significant amount of advisor time and effort. In addition, the omitted activities indicate a clear decrease in advisor involvement. However, the remaining trials and related activities were considered consistent with high-involvement criteria.

At the end of the each semester, the following information was collected on each student in the study: academic action, which was based on semester GPA (see Table 3); semester GPA; number of meetings with an academic advisor; and for students in the high-involvement group, responses to a survey of activity satisfaction. Students in this study were placed into three academic action categories: a) suspension-dismissal, b) continued probation, and c) removed from probation. Students

who were dismissed or suspended were combined into one group because their fates were based on the same GPA parameters. Dismissals are issued only to students who were previously suspended while at the university.

Results

The student academic performances in each trial were measured by academic actions at the end of the intervention and by intervention-semester GPA. While the two measures are related, favorable academic action may be the prime academic goal for advisees because if a student earns a semester GPA below 2.00, he or she will be suspended or dismissed. To compare significant differences in the proportion of students facing different academic actions, we used a chi-square analysis (see Table 4). In Trial 1, 25 students in the low-involvement group were suspended-dismissed and 12 students in the high-involvement group were suspended-dismissed; the differences in the number of suspended-dismissed students were significantly different: $\chi^2(2, N = 84) = 5.94, p < 0.10$. We found no other significant differences in academic action between the low- and high-involvement groups in the remaining trials.

To compare for significant differences between the mean semester GPA of the low- and high-involvement groups, a two-tailed t test was used for each trial (see Table 5). We found significant

Table 5 Semester GPA means for low- and high-involvement groups

Trial	GPA	
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
1 Low	41	1.60 (1.03)
High	36	2.12 (1.15)
2 Low	55	2.09 (0.90)
High	49	2.22 (0.84)
3 Low	38	1.15 (1.68)
High	25	2.96 (1.09)

Notes. For Trial 1: $t = 2.11, p < 0.05$. For Trial 3: $t = 4.72, p < 0.001$.

differences between the means in Trial 1 ($t = 2.11, p < 0.05$) and Trial 3 ($t = 4.72, p < 0.001$). In Trial 2, we found no significant differences among the means.

For each trial, more students in the high-involvement group met with advisors than did those in the low-involvement group (see Table 6). We found significant differences between the mean number of advisor meetings in all trials: for Trial 1, $t = 11.36, p < 0.001$; for Trial 2, $t = 14.77, p < 0.001$; for Trial 3, $t = 5.13, p < 0.001$.

The students in the high-involvement groups in each trial found the program of intervention very useful: $M = 4.26$ on a 5-point scale (5 = very useful; 1 = not useful). Comments from students in the survey were positive for both the advisor meetings and the other activities.

Discussion

In this study, we have shown that the differences in suspension-dismissal rates and semester GPAs between students in high- and low-involvement groups were statistically significant. However, for advisors to be effective in assisting students with these measures of improved academic performance, institutional involvement must be very high, such as in the Trial 1 high-involvement group. Students in the high-involvement groups of Trials 2 and 3, which lacked the written assignments and reminder phone calls, did not perform significantly better than did their counterparts in the low-involvement groups. The relatively high semester mean GPA found after Trial 3 among the high-involvement group students was caused by several high performing students who formed an outlier population. In addition, the higher nonparticipation rate in this trial's high-involvement group may have resulted in a more self-selected group of higher-achieving students. When these students' GPAs are not included

Table 6 Mean number of meetings with advisors for low- and high-involvement groups

Trial	Number of Meetings	
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
1 Low	41	0.6 (1.03)
High	36	2.8 (0.68)
2 Low	55	0.4 (0.76)
High	49	3.1 (1.04)
3 Low	38	1.1 (1.68)
High	25	2.9 (1.09)

Note. All t tests showed significant differences between mean GPAs of all three trial groups ($p < 0.001$).

in the calculations, the academic-action pattern for Trial 3 is similar between high- and low-involvement groups.

The lack of significant differences in academic action in Trials 2 and 3 suggests that a study strategies assignment, as was required for the Trial 1 high-involvement group, may enable students to change their study strategies. While students recognize the value of learning new strategies, following through on changes may be difficult unless the advisees are actively engaged. The performance differences between high-involvement students in Trials 2 and 3 may be due to the lack of reminder phone calls, which reduces the participation rate and the presence of the institution in the students' lives.

Inviting letters are not sufficient to encourage students in academic difficulty to frequently visit advisors. Students in the Trial 3 low-involvement group averaged approximately one visit for the semester. This result supports the view that students are not self-directed in seeking help when in academic difficulty. However, as evidenced by Trials 2 and 3, a visit to an institutional representative was not enough to improve academic performances of students in the low-level high-involvement groups.

Students in the high involvement group do not feel annoyed or demeaned by aggressive institutional involvement. On the contrary, students expressed relief that they were "called in." They often said that they were ashamed about their academic performances and were relieved to be able to discuss academic, and often, personal problems that interfered with their studying. However, student satisfaction with high institutional involvement in their academic lives does not automatically translate to better performance as indicated by the varying results from the different trials.

A limitation of this study is the selection of students in the study sample. We decided not to include

those who chose not to participate in the meetings and other high-involvement activities. While not included in our study, when evaluating the value of high-involvement method at an institution, the fate of these unwilling students must be considered. Many of them were suspended or dismissed, which suggests that even if a comprehensive high-involvement model (as in Trial 1) was implemented, a certain proportion of students will refuse help and fail. We did not conduct a formal inquiry into the reasons for student nonparticipation in this study and eventual performances, but it is an important area that calls for a follow-up study.

In conclusion, we feel that high-institutional involvement is effective in providing assistance to students experiencing academic difficulty, especially for those students who have difficulty in seeking help, but to make the program effective, administrators should provide comprehensive activities and fully commit staff and physical resources to the project. If institutions cannot afford to commit these resources, a minimal level of involvement may be effective. In either case, advisors and administrators should not assume that aggressive involvement alienates students who are in academic difficulty. In fact, high-involvement intervention may be a positive outcome regardless of eventual academic performance: Students may feel that the people in the institution care enough to reach out during their times of difficulty.

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