

Problem Areas for the Student on Probation: The Role of the Academic Advisor

JAMES E. RUSSELL is *academic counselor for the College of Professional Studies, Northern Illinois University*.

Many of us who work daily with students on academic probation find that those who are later academically dismissed make relatively common errors in judgment. Many of these students might have stayed in college if they had made different decisions while on probation.

In this situation, experience may be the best teacher, but students on probation have little opportunity to learn from trial and error. When on probation, a student's entire academic future may depend on whether the next semester is academically above standards. Another poor semester is grounds for temporary or permanent dismissal in most institutions. One task of the academic advisor is to impart the knowledge or collective wisdom of previous students' experiences to the student on academic probation. If the advisor does so, individual students may avoid the drastic consequences of learning by errors and failure.

Usually students believe they are doing what is logical and appropriate to improve their academic situation. The following list includes some student errors we see most often and the logic students use to make these mistaken judgments:

1. Enroll in too many credit hours. Students think they can "get it all back" through one heroic try and, thus, attempt to make the entire grade-point-average improvement in a single semester.
2. Avoid repeating courses in which they earned below-average grades. Students fear repeating courses they earned below-average grades in and, instead, hope to make up the difference in other courses.
3. Attempt to drop a course after the deadline for withdrawals. Students believe they will receive special consideration because of their situation and expect to withdraw to protect their grade-point average.
4. Fail to resolve incomplete grades within the time limit. Students hope that by not doing anything, the institution will not consider the incomplete grade in their case. Sometimes they fear completion of the grade (i.e., replacement grade for the incomplete) will hurt their chances for continuation at the school.
5. Take advanced courses with a weak or inadequate background. Many students think they *must* graduate on time and, therefore, must not interrupt the sequence of courses for any reason.

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6. Take courses on the advice of a friend. Students often are "advised" by friends to take courses simply because someone else found these courses met his needs.
7. Take all of their early courses exclusively in the general education areas. Students want to get all of the basic courses out of the way.
8. Seek academic or personal help late in the semester. Students want to do it on their own and seek help only when it is too late.

A major function of the academic advisor involves interceding and showing the student his mistakes in judgment. The academic advisor must explain how these seemingly logical decisions are, in fact, illogical. The following advising areas, listed in order, help to clarify the error of these decisions and recommend ways to prevent such errors:

1. Students on probation should take fewer credit hours, not more. Students who attempt to make large grade-point-average improvements in one semester usually find they do poorer work because of the multiplying effects of more quizzes, papers, tests, class hours, etc. A maximum course load for students on probation might be the minimum for full-time student classification. A student who earns more average grades makes less grade-point improvement than the student who earns fewer, but higher grades.
2. Students who earned below-average grades in courses usually should repeat those courses as soon as possible — many institutions allow repeated grades to replace original grades in calculating the grade-point average. For example, a student who repeats an "F" course and receives a "C" has improved his GPA as much as earning an "A" in another course, if the repeated grade replaces the original in calculations. Most students do improve their grade upon repeating a course because they know what to expect and what to study, with their prior exposure to the subject matter. Unless the student lacks a prerequisite for repeating the course, he usually should repeat the course to improve his grade-point average and to remove the failure symbolically, if not physically, from his record.
3. An advisor should emphasize that a student cannot withdraw from courses past the established deadline unless the institution provides special arrangements. If the institution does not allow withdrawals after the deadline, the student should know early in the term.
4. Students who do not resolve incomplete grades usually suffer more serious consequences than if they had resolved the incompletes routinely. In some cases, incompletes automatically become failures or change to failures after a certain length of time. Thus, advisors should inform students of the significance of resolved incompletes compared even to mediocre completion.
5. Students sometimes believe they must continue the scheduled sequence of courses in spite of academic difficulties. In rigorous majors,

students should repeat some courses, even when they earn passing grades, if they are weak or ill-prepared to continue the sequence. Often students refuse to take a short delay in completing a sequence, which, in turn, may cause a much greater delay if they are dismissed from school. Students should know the difficulty involved in mastering advanced courses in their major and should prepare sufficiently before proceeding.

6. Students often take courses on the advice of friends. Friends with good intentions may misadvise their comrades about courses that are easy and appropriate for some, but difficult and inappropriate for others. The probationary student should place only limited faith in the course selections of friends.
7. Students frequently feel compelled to complete all general education courses as soon as possible. With this approach, however, a student may become discouraged and lose sight of the relevance of a total education. Thus, an advisor should encourage a probationary student to combine general and major course work and to take at least one course in his/her own interest area each semester.
8. Students often fall prey to the myth of self-reliance. They believe that if they are not totally independent they are somehow unfit or unqualified for higher education. Such an assumption is neither true nor necessary. Students need to know about resources available on campus and to be assured that using support services is expected and encouraged as part of the total academic experience.

During the course of academic advising, I require students on probation to seek academic advising from our college office. In addition, with probationary students I go over these possible mistakes systematically and discuss with the student the most appropriate strategies for bringing his grade-point average to an acceptable level. If the student is making some mistakes, I discuss possible consequences of his action and suggest alternatives. Also I share with the student my experiences with others on academic probation.

Exact advice given an individual student depends, of course, on that student's unique situation and the academic rules and regulations of his institution. Nevertheless, academic advisors who discuss problems mentioned in this article with probationary students likely will point out many errors their students may be making. Reducing these common errors should reduce the attrition of students who, with proper academic counseling, will go on to adequate scholastic achievement.