Academic Dismissal, Readmission Conditions, and Retention: A Study of Social Science Majors

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This project attempts to assess the relative effectiveness of readmission conditions among approximately 500 social science majors at a large state university, supplemented by an analysis of the retention status of almost 7,800 social science students at the same institution. Whites, African-Americans, Hispanics, males, juniors, transfer students, those in their mid-20s, those with interdisciplinary and limited-access majors, and those with low high school grade point averages (GPAs) appear to be most at risk. However, academic success among those who are readmitted is significantly associated only with gender, quality point deficit, and readmission conditions.

Recent trends in higher education have accentuated the role of readmission counseling. Growing numbers of ill-prepared students, significant inflow of community college graduates under long-term articulation agreements, and increasing pressures to stay in school given declining job markets and postgraduate loan obligations have all contributed to rising dismissal rates. Understanding the comparative effectiveness of particular readmission conditions has become increasingly pertinent to effective retention counseling.

Academic retention may be viewed as a function of a student's (a) background characteristics (Galicki & McEwan, 1989; Gosman, Dandridge, Nettles, & Thoney, 1983), (b) level of high school and college performance (Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, & Blackwell, 1984; Johnson, 1987; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfie, 1988; Wishart, 1990), and (c) degree of integration into the institution's general environment (Getzlaf et al., 1984; Stoecker et al., 1988). However, little attention has apparently been paid to the relative effectiveness of reentry conditions on actual persistence levels. This study tries to incorporate such requirements into an analysis of academic retention with respect to a student's background (race, gender, age, and citizenship status) and academic traits (high school GPA, major, classification, transfer status, and quality point deficit), focusing on the relative effectiveness of particular readmission conditions such as dealing with grade problems, changing majors, completing correspondence courses, repeating failed courses for "forgiveness," and effecting retroactive withdrawals. These data are expected to provide insights into effective retention counseling.

This study attempts to assess the relative effectiveness of readmission conditions among approximately 500 social science majors who were dismissed from a large state university between Spring 1989 and Fall 1991, focusing on background and academic traits. These data are supplemented by an analysis of the retention status of approximately 7,800 social science majors at the same institution between Spring 1991 and Summer 1992.

Methods

Information on all students (approximately 7,800) in the College of Social Sciences enrolled between Spring 1991 and Summer 1992 (the period for which data were available) was gathered. This data set was analyzed with respect to the relationship between background and academic traits and academic standing, namely those who were on probation or dismissed at the end of the previous semester (GPA $<$ 2.0 on a 5.0 scale) versus those in good standing (GPA $\geq$ 2.0). These factors consisted of race, gender, age, citizenship status (U.S./non-U.S.), major, classification, high school GPA (where available), and transfer status. Cross-tabulations were developed and tests of significance (chi-square) run in each case. The Two Sample Proportion Test was used to test intergroup differences within tables.

The second part of the project focused on approximately 500 students who were dismissed and readmitted (or reinstated) between Summer 1989 and Spring 1992. The data were examined with respect to the effects of background characteristics (i.e., race, gender, age, and citizenship status), academic traits (i.e., major, classification, high school GPA, quality point deficit, and transfer status), and the specific conditions of their readmission on whether they were successful in attaining good standing at the end of that semester. Readmission conditions consisted of: (a) attend a community college to complete

A.A. degree and return with satisfactory GPA, (b) deal with grade problem (e.g., check accuracy of grade with instructor or complete incomplete coursework), (c) change major, (d) stay out of school and take correspondence courses to improve GPA, (e) make use of forgiveness policy to repeat courses (maximum of two) and improve specific grades, (f) bring GPA up to good standing (i.e., ≥ 2.0) or be permanently dismissed at the end of the semester, and (g) withdraw from courses retroactively based on documented reasons. Again, cross-tabulations and significance tests (chi-square and the Two Sample Proportion Test) were used to examine these relationships.

The above data sets are subject to several clear limitations: (a) they focus on students in one college only, (b) students who are dismissed

TABLE 1
Demographics of College of Social Sciences Students With a GPA Less Than 2.0 (Spring 1991 Through Summer 1992)

	n	% < 2.0 GPA	Significant Intergroup Comparisons ($p \leq .05$)
Race*			
A. White	6811	20.6	AB, AC
B. African-American	434	25.3	BC
C. Asian-American	122	12.3	CE
D. Native American	17	11.8	
E. Hispanic	384	21.3	
Gender*			
A. Female	2750	17.1	AB
B. Male	5018	22.8	
Birth Decade*			
A. 1970s	2947	19.1	AB, AC
B. 1960s	4362	22.8	BC
C. 1950s	459	12.0	
Class*			
A. Junior	2912	29.5	AB
B. Senior	4826	15.3	
Transfer Status*			
A. Nontransfer	1735	16.2	AB
B. Transfer	6033	22.1	
High School GPA*			
A. < 2.0	166	34.9	AB, AC, AD
B. 2.0-2.9	2048	21.6	BC, BD
C. 3.0-3.9	1597	16.1	CD
D. 4.0-5.0	269	4.5	
Major*			
A. Asian Studies	43	19.4	
B. Economics	1044	22.0	BC, BF
C. Geography	240	16.2	CE
D. Political Science	2966	20.0	DE
E. Social Science	1532	24.5	EF, EG
F. Sociology	704	18.2	
G. International Affairs	1235	19.3	
H. Slavic & East European	4	0.0	

*$\chi^2 = p \leq .05$

more than once figure repeatedly in the data, (c) the two sets reflect different time periods and are not strictly comparable, and (d) some variables are subject to high levels of missing data (particularly high school GPA). Those on probation are also combined with those who have been dismissed in the larger data set because it was impossible to separate them effectively. Provided these restrictions are kept in mind, this information may provide useful insight into dismissal and effective readmission counseling.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the backgrounds and academic traits of students with GPAs of less than 2.0 enrolled in the college between Spring 1991 and Summer 1992. These collegewide data revealed that probationary or dismissal status was significantly related to virtually all of the background and academic variables. Asian-Americans tend to be dismissed significantly less often than White students, African-Americans, and Hispanics. White students were also dismissed somewhat less often than African-Americans. Males run into problems more often than females, as do students in their mid-20s in contrast to older or younger individuals.

Turning to academic traits, juniors had more problems than seniors, reflecting, perhaps, the difficulties experienced by some transfer students during their first year at the university. Transfer students clearly had more problems than native students; however, this result may reflect higher admission standards for transfer

TABLE 2
Demographics of Successful Readmissions to the College of Social Sciences (Summer 1989 Through Spring 1992)

	n	% ≥ 2.0 GPA	Significant Intergroup Comparisons ($p \leq .05$)
Gender*			
A. Female	113	54.9	AB
B. Male	385	41.8	
Quality Point Deficit*			
A. ≤ 3	144	56.2	AC, AD, AF
B. > 3 ≤ 6	94	53.2	BC, BD, BF
C. > 6 ≤ 9	66	34.4	
D. > 9 ≤ 12	53	28.3	
E. ≥ 12 ≤ 15	24	37.5	EF
F. ≥ 15	76	15.8	
Readmission Conditions[1]*			
A. Complete AA (AA)	4	100.0	AB, AC, AD, AE, AF, AG
B. Change Grade (CG)	59	40.7	
C. Change Major (CM)	47	44.7	
D. Correspondence (CO)	60	46.7	DE
E. Forgiveness (FG)	82	29.3	EF
F. Good Standing (GS)	238	50.0	
G. Retroactive Withdrawal (RW)	8	37.5	

*$\chi^2 = p \leq .05$

'Readmission Conditions
AA = return to community college to complete AA degree
CG = change grade by completing course requirements and/or check grade accuracy
CM = change major
CO = complete correspondence courses
FG = repeat course for forgiveness
GS = achieve good standing by semester end
RW = retroactive withdrawal for problematic course/semester

students without an A.A. degree (GPA admission requirement in their case ≥ 3.0). Although high school GPAs were available for only approximately 48% of the students, they are an important index of academic ability given the differential admission criteria of community colleges and universities. The results clearly indicate that students with a high school GPA of less than 2.0 more often experience probationary or dismissal status than those in all the other grade ranges. Those in the 2.0-2.9 range perform less well than those with higher GPAs, as do those in the 3.0-3.9 range compared to those with the highest GPAs. Finally, those majoring in interdisciplinary programs such as social science more often run into academic problems than students in political science, sociology, international affairs, and geography. Students in economics (a limited-access major) also tend to be dismissed more often than those in sociology and geography.

According to these general data, social science students who are most at risk academically are more often Whites, African-Americans, Hispanics, males, juniors, transfer students, those in their mid-20s, those with interdisciplinary and limited-access majors, and those with low high school GPAs. To see how these factors affect academic performance after readmission, let's look at the second data set.

Table 2 summarizes the backgrounds and academic traits of students readmitted to the college between Summer 1989 and Spring 1992 who attained good standing. Far fewer background and academic traits are statistically significant. First, females achieve good standing more often than males. Second, examining quality point deficits (i.e., points below the number of attempted GPA hours x 2) reveals that those with a deficit of 3 or less achieve good standing more often than those with more severe deficits. Third, those who had met certain readmission conditions were more successful than others: attending a community college to complete an A.A. degree had more impact than any of the other conditions; correspondence work was more successful than forgiveness; and mandatory achievement of good standing (i.e., the stu-

TABLE 3
Successful Readmission to the College of Social Sciences (Summer 1989 Through Spring 1992) by Demographics and Significant Readmission Conditions

	Significant Readmission Condition			
	Correspondence Work*		Good Standing*	
	n	% ≥ 2.0 GPA	*n*	% ≥ 2.0 GPA
Quality Point Deficit				
A. ≤ 3	7	85.7	80	58.7
B. > 3 ≤ 6	11	63.6	45	66.7
C. > 6 ≤ 9	7	57.1	32	40.6
D. > 9 ≤ 12	10	40.0	21	28.6
E. > 12 ≤ 15	10	30.0	10	50.0
F. > 15	11	0.0	31	16.1
Significant Intergroup Comparisons ($p \leq .05$)	AC AE BC		AD, AF, BC, BD, BF, CF, EF	
	Forgiveness*		Good Standing**	
Gender				
Female	17	52.9	51	60.8
Male	65	23.1	187	47.0
Significant Intergroup Comparisons ($p \leq .05$)	AB		AB***	

* $\chi^2 = p \leq .05$
** $\chi^2 = p \leq .10$
*** $p \leq .10$

dent will not be readmitted following the next dismissal) was more effective than forgiveness.

Finally, focusing on the variables that proved to be significant in the above analysis, we first examined the relationship among quality point deficit, readmission conditions, and academic persistence and then among gender, readmission conditions, and academic persistence. The significant results are presented in Table 3. They point to the relative effectiveness of correspondence work and mandatory good standing among students with lower quality point deficits. Among those who completed correspondence work, students with a quality point deficit of 3 or less were significantly more successful than those with more severe deficits. Similarly, among those forced to attain good standing as a readmission condition, students who had lower deficits were significantly more successful than those in deeper trouble. Even those 12 to 15 points down more often attained good standing than those with more severe deficits. Forgiveness and mandatory good standing also appeared to work better among females than males.

Conclusions

The data appear to indicate that at-risk social science students tend more often to be Whites, African-Americans, Hispanics, males, juniors, transfer students, those in their mid-20s, those with interdisciplinary and limited-access majors, and those with low high school GPAs. However, academic success among those who are readmitted is significantly associated only with gender, quality point deficit, and certain readmission conditions. Thus, academic failure is associated with a variety of background and academic traits, but successful readmission is associated with such factors to a far lesser extent.

These trends suggest three important counseling implications:

1. At-risk students should be targeted for special attention before the dismissal stage. All those on probation, for example, might be required to attend a group counseling meeting and then monitored during that semester (cf. Garnett, 1990). Many students appear to misunderstand or be confused by their probationary status, the nature of their quality point deficit, and how to address their problems. Possible learning disabilities or deficiencies in mathematics, English, or reading due to inadequate high school preparation might be explored at this time.

2. Readmission counseling might focus on quality point deficit in reference to specific conditions, suggested by the above data trends, which will maximize students' chances of success. Dealing with them in general terms clearly does not work.

3. Some readmission conditions, such as repeating courses under forgiveness or retroactive withdrawal, appear relatively ineffective for particular students and should be used with caution.

In general, this study points to the complicated nature of academic failure and retention. Further research into the relationship among background, academic, and admission requirements and academic persistence may enhance readmission counseling.

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