

Causes, Reactions, and Consequences of Academic Probation: A Theoretical Model

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This paper presents a three-stage model of academic probation that addresses cognitive, affective (emotional), behavioral, and environmental factors. The first stage examines the precursors to probation—factors that inhibit student performance. The second stage focuses on student reactions to being placed on probation. The various strategies students use to cope with probation are then used to predict the third stage or long-term consequences of probation. The key assumption behind this model is that student causal ascriptions for probation are an important predictor of future performance and self-concept. Intervention strategies are proposed that focus on attributional retraining in addition to traditional programs. Finally, it is hoped that this model will promote heuristic research concerning at-risk students as well as those on academic probation.

Introduction

Most colleges have procedures for academic probation and the criteria for probation are usually stated in the college catalogue. For example, the catalogue at North Central College states:

Students falling behind in their studies to the point where the degree may soon be out of reach are placed on academic probation. The action warns the student and the faculty advisor that real problems exist in motivation or study skills, and that they must be diagnosed and addressed. The student who cannot be helped to reverse direction after a period of probation will be dismissed from the college. (p. 32)

When a student is placed on probation, he or she is given the rationale for probation ("your GPA [Grade Point Average] has fallen below a predetermined level") and criteria for being removed from probation ("you must attain a GPA this term of at least . . ."). The consequences of failing to meet the stated criteria usually include dismissal from the college.

Why do colleges place students on academic probation in the first place? One possible reason is that probation is used as a form of punishment to encourage satisfactory student performance. Another possible explanation is that probation is used to clearly inform a student of the gravity of performing sub-

standard academic work. In order to graduate, a student must have a minimum GPA; students on academic probation are in danger of not meeting that minimum GPA, and probation may clarify the student's position. A third possible reason colleges use probation is to identify individuals at risk for leaving college and help them improve performance and stay in school. There may be other reasons for maintaining a policy that includes academic probation; whatever the reason, colleges identify students experiencing academic difficulty.

Once a student has been placed on academic probation, the college often requires the student to perform certain tasks. A student on academic probation may be required to meet on a regular basis with his or her advisor, attend study-skills or time-management workshops, meet with other faculty members or staff to discuss the probation, or complete some combination of the above. There are several assumptions behind these intervention plans: a) the student possesses the ability to perform at a satisfactory level; b) the student may lack skills important to academic success (e.g., study-skills, time-management skills, ability to select appropriate courses) that is inhibiting performance; c) all students on probation can benefit from the intervention programs provided.

This paper presents an integrative model of academic probation. This model addresses three general phases of academic probation: precursors; immediate cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences; and long-term cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences (see Table 1). This model challenges some of the traditional assumptions behind academic probation. Interventions are proposed that include attributional modeling and individualized support for students.

Precursors to Probation

There are many possible precursors to academic probation. For simplicity, they can be organized into four general groups identified in a model proposed by Heider (1958, 1959) and extended by Weiner (1979, 1985). Heider suggests that the perception of causality is a combination of personal and environmental forces. Personal forces, specific to the individual, can be subdivided into two factors: "can" and "try." Can suggests that the individual has the

Table 1
Three-stage model of academic probation

precursors					
internal-uncontrollable	internal-controllable	external-stable		external-unstable	
ability	effort	social support/pressure		course selection	

immediate reactions					
cognitive				affective	behavioral
internal-uncontrollable	internal-controllable	external-stable	external-unstable	global	impression

long-term consequences		
cognitive	affective	behavioral
self-concept (esteem)	specific affective reactions	seek help

power (ability) to accomplish a task whereas try reflects effort and intention. Weiner (1985) suggests that individuals are capable of making finer distinctions and proposed a three-dimensional model of attributional thought consisting of locus (internal-external), stability (stable-unstable), and controllability (controllable-uncontrollable) dimensions. Although the structure and organization of attributional thought has been debated (Wimer & Kelley, 1982), Forsyth, Kelley, & Mooney (1988) and Kelley (1986, 1988) suggest that a four-factor structure can account for attributional reactions to failure. This model was developed using both inductive and deductive techniques in a three-stage procedure. First, following performance feedback on a classroom exam, students were asked to list factors which contributed to their performances. In the second stage a questionnaire was developed using student statements. In the third stage, students in another class rated the causal importance of these statements in contributing to their grades. Following Joreskog & Sorbom (1979), several models of the structure of attributional thought were compared using LISREL [Linear Structural Relations] (or confirmatory factor analysis). The model supported by this deductive technique yielded four underlying factors: internal-uncontrollable, internal-controllable, external-stable, and external-unstable. The Weiner model suggests that when individuals look inside themselves for explanations about performance, controllability appears to be the most important dimension ("can I do anything to alter my performance?"). However, when they look outside of

self, stability is paramount ("are these conditions which contributed to my performance going to change?"). Controllability refers to factors that individuals can readily change. Students may believe that ability or self-concept can change over time, while effort is relatively easy to change.

In the precursor stage, the proposed model examines factors that contribute to student performance. These factors include the characteristics that students bring with them to college (e.g., skills, abilities, attitudes, etc.) and their experiences upon attending college (e.g., social relations, course work, etc.). The four-factor structure will be used to organize this information.

Internal-Uncontrollable Factors. Internal-uncontrollable factors are those that are characteristic of the individual and are difficult to change. For example, one possible cause of academic probation is student inability to master college-level coursework—or the courses at the college they are currently attending; basic ability is difficult to change. Other internal-uncontrollable factors include personality, self-concept, and health. For example Dunn & Dunn (1993); Dunn, Dunn, & Price (1991); and Lenehan, Dunn, Ingham, Murray, & Singer (in press) suggest that an individual's learning-style affects classroom performance. They propose a model which suggests students learn in a variety of ways. If students are unaware of their learning styles, or attempt to study in ways that do not fit their styles, they handicap their own performances. Personality factors such as need for achievement (McClelland, 1980; Raynor, 1970), openness to experience, and

conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1987) may also contribute to how a student approaches the demands and expectations of colleges.

Other factors such as learning disabilities, self-concept, and health may also contribute to student performance. Brinckerhoff (1989) states that many students experience academic difficulties because they have an unassessed learning disability. A student may assume that the difficulty experienced in understanding a book is related to inability, rather than a learning problem such as dyslexia, and never seek appropriate testing. Focusing on self-concept, Bandura (1986) argues that individuals who are high in self-efficacy (the belief that one can personally control outcomes) perform the actions needed for success. In contrast, individuals low in self-efficacy do not engage in behaviors necessary for success and are therefore more likely to encounter failure. Multon, Brown, & Lent (1991) suggest that individuals with low self-efficacy (low self-concept) lack persistence, have low educational satisfaction, and poor academic performance. Finally, individuals may perform poorly over time due to a long-term health problem that hinders performance.

Internal-Controllable Factors. Internal-controllable factors are intrinsic to the individual and can be changed with relative ease. For example, effort is an internal-controllable factor. Students can choose whether or not to study and prepare for courses. de Charms (1968) argues that effort is a central component in determining action and outcome. We can take action and gain control over situations. In academic situations, students choose how to allocate their time. Although students do not always make active choices (e.g., plan ahead), they can control their levels of effort.

In a similar vein, values and motivation can be viewed as controllable. It can be argued that values are shaped by our environment (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). However, de Charms suggests that as autonomous beings we can freely choose our own values (a process which is facilitated by education). Researchers in a variety of situations have suggested that when values are known and clear, they can direct and motivate behavior (Katz & Hass, 1988; Schwartz & Howard, 1982). This research also suggests that when values are clear, we actively seek out situations in which to engage in appropriate behaviors. A logical extension from research about values is that students who value a college education will be motivated to succeed. If they are unclear about the importance of or do not value an education, they are unlikely to be motivated. Students with clear motives for achieving academic success will likely be more proactive in

pursuing educational goals, and students who are unsure about reasons for attending college may be more passive ("college is something that is done to me").

External-stable Factors. Sometimes external situations inhibit student performance. "Stable" suggests that environments are unlikely to quickly change. For example, family and social environments are often stable. Students in unhealthy environments that prohibit study and preparation may not be able to change the situation or performance. Other students may lack the social support necessary to value a college education. Some may experience social pressures at college that guide them to behaviors that are not conducive to learning.

External-unstable Factors. Some external factors are transient in nature. For example, students change courses and instructors every term. A student may not perform well in a class because he or she is not interested in the subject, or a particular instructor may not conform to the student's learning style (or the instructor may be ineffective).

Summary: Precursors to probation. A number of factors affect student performance. For some students, a single factor may be causally important, for others a combination of factors may contribute to poor performances. Academic probation is usually enforced after a pattern of poor performance indicating that the student is having trouble in a wide variety of classes rather than in a single course. In assessing the key cause or causes of performance, advisors should look for those factors that cut across a variety of situations.

Immediate Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Reactions

Students reactions to poor performance vary. For some it is a very emotional experience whereas for others, it is not very traumatic. Some students may view failure as a challenge to be overcome. Others may see it as confirmation that they do not possess the ability to be a successful student. Some students may attempt to hide or deny their failures, others may try to explain them away, while others may just leave the academic institution. The model organizes these reactions into three general categories: affective (emotional), cognitive, and behavioral.

Shortly after a student receives notice of probation (or any performance feedback), a number of systems are set in motion. Research suggests that there are cognitive (attributional), affective (emotional), and behavioral reactions to receiving performance feedback. Although there is some theoretical debate about the order of these reactions (Lazarus,

1984; Zajonc, 1984), researchers agree they occur temporally close. One possible sequence proposed by Kelley & Forsyth (1984) suggests students experience a global affective reaction when they attempt to explain their performances. They use these explanations to guide the future behaviors and to present themselves to others.

The Affective Reaction. Following performance feedback (statement of academic probation) students experience a global negative affective reaction. There is a mix of emotions including anger, depression, shame, tension, and sadness. The model suggests that upon notification of probationary status, students do not make fine distinctions among affective states; they simply feel bad (negative). These reactions are mediated to some extent by student expectations. When the outcomes deviate from the expectations, the emotional reaction is stronger. Students who expect to fail and do fail have time to prepare and their emotional reactions are lessened.

Cognitive (Attributional) Responses. Following the performance feedback and the global negative affective reaction, students are then motivated to understand the causes of their performances (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1971). They make attributions. These attributions serve several functions (Forsyth, 1980). First, attributions assist in anticipating future events. If a student attributes failure to an internal-uncontrollable cause (such as ability), she or he can reasonably predict continued failure. On the other hand, if failure is attributed to internal controllable causes (effort), future performance would then be dependent on that student's behavior. A similar pattern is found for the external factors. When failure is ascribed to external-stable causes, performance will likely remain the same. When external-unstable factors are viewed as important, there is a chance for improvement. Second, attributions serve an interpersonal function. Friends and family members often know when a student is on probation and the student attempts to explain it in order to control the impressions of others. Bradley (1978, p. 63) states that students have a "desire to maintain or gain a positive public image." Third, attributions can be self-serving. Students who believe they can avoid esteem-damaging consequences of failure by denying responsibility may externalize causality in an attempt to protect self-image.

Following failure feedback, external factors are the ones most frequently cited (Zuckerman, 1979). The student is probably attempting to protect her or his self-image. If the failure was not the student's fault, then the student cannot be held responsible and should not feel bad. The negative consequence

to this type of thinking is that when students do not believe they are in control of their performances, they do not know what to do to improve. An interesting exception to the external trend includes students who have low self-esteem and are anxious about academics. These students often attribute failure to internal-uncontrollable causes (Arkin, Kolditz & Kolditz, 1983) and each may see poor performance as confirming his or her low self-esteem ("yes, I knew I was dumb"). In either case, students are attributing causality to factors they cannot directly control. Common sense suggests that students on probation may need to work harder to improve their performances. However, if these students make attributions to uncontrollable factors (ability, bad classes) they may not believe that there is a link between effort and performance.

Attributions are a student's perception of the factors that contributed to performance. Perceptions are often biased. A student may be attempting to protect or enhance self-image or may be manipulating the impressions of others.

Summary: Immediate Reactions. After being informed about academic probation, students experience a general negative affective reaction then seek possible causes for probation. They may attribute causality to one or more of the following factors: internal-uncontrollable, internal-controllable, external-controllable, or external-uncontrollable factors. These attributions may be used to protect self-image and to predict future performance. In addition there are behavioral consequences such as impression management (when students are asked to explain why they are on academic probation to family, friends, or college personnel). A student may attempt to explain the situation to others in order to protect her or his reputation ("I'm not a bad person—it's not my fault") or confirm a preexisting belief ("I knew I wasn't smart enough for college").

Research suggests that the attributional bias to protect one's self-image is not adaptive. When attributing causality to uncontrollable factors, students may believe that they are helpless to control future outcomes. If a student believes failure is caused by low ability or unfair grading, the student feels incompetent to improve. The motivation to take active steps to improve is reduced and continued failure is likely. To some extent, long-term consequences are dependent on immediate reactions, particularly the attributional responses.

Long-Term Consequences

Long-term consequences of academic probation are in many ways related to attributional explana-

tions of performance. Similar to the immediate reactions, the long-term consequences can be grouped into three general categories: cognitive, affective, and behavioral.

Affective Consequences. Over time, affective reactions tend to become more specific. Following the initial global reaction, student attributions refine and mediate emotional interpretations. For example, Arkin, Detchon, & Maruyama (1982) reported that following failure, internal-uncontrollable attributions were associated with increased levels of shame. When failure was attributed to external factors, students reported higher levels of fear, and when controllable attributions were made, students reported higher levels of distress. Interestingly, Redstrom, Kelley, Forsyth, & Noel (1986) found that students making uncontrollable attributions showed stable or increased negative affect up to two weeks following failure feedback. Students attributing the failure to controllable causes saw decreased negative affect over a two week period. Burns & Seligman (1991) reported that individuals who focus on uncontrollable attributions show increased depression and decreased productivity over time.

Cognitive Consequences. Cognitive implications of academic probation primarily affect self-concept. When students attribute performance to uncontrollable factors, they likely feel reduced self-efficacy and self-esteem. Lowered self-efficacy results in reduced interest in the task, lower levels of persistence, and decreases in performance (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). Tice (1991) argues that students with lower self-esteem are also more likely to engage in self-handicapping (seeking and creating impediments for performance). In addition to self-concept, students can alter their expectations about future performances. Forsyth & McMillian (1981) reported that students who attributed failure to controllable factors expected performances to increase over time. Students attributing failure to uncontrollable factors expected performances to remain stable or decrease over time.

Behavioral Consequences. Certain behaviors also appear to be linked to attributional responses to failure. Individuals emphasizing uncontrollable factors show reduced productivity (Burns & Seligman, 1991), give-up more easily (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991), and engage in increased self-handicapping (Tice, 1991). Research by Ames & Lau (1982) found that students making uncontrollable attributions were also less likely to seek help than students making controllable attributions. It stands to reason that if students do not believe an outcome can be controlled, they should not put effort into improving their performances.

Conclusions

This model of academic probation suggests that there are three distinct phases: precursors, immediate reactions, and long-term consequences. The precursor stage includes actual individual and environmental factors that lead to probation. Some of these factors are controllable and others are not. The second phase focuses on individual student reactions to being placed on probation. It is hypothesized that a global negative affective state drives cognitive (attributional) and behavioral (impression management) reactions. Research suggests that a student is likely to attribute causality to uncontrollable factors to protect self-esteem and public image. However, the long-term consequences of making uncontrollable attributions appear detrimental to the student. These students show reduced self-esteem, increased negative affect and depression, and are less likely to engage in behaviors that result in improved performance. This model also implies that unconfident students will have negative spirals of repeat failures.

Implicit within the model are two areas of intervention. First, there is the opportunity to assess the precursors to probation: help students to avoid probation in the first place. For example, Dunn & Dunn (1993) suggest focusing on learning style. With additional information about how an individual learns, each student could better prepare for classes and work with faculty members and staff to structure assignments. Wilson & Linville (1985) suggest that an effective mechanism to avoid poor performance is attributional training. In their research, students were trained to attribute failure to controllable causes before they received performance feedback. They found that the attributionally-trained students were less likely to drop out, had higher GPAs, and performed better on sample items from the Graduate Record Exam than attributionally untrained students.

A second point of intervention follows notice of academic probation. Traditional approaches to probation include making students take study skills and time-management seminars, attend counseling sessions, or other similar interventions. The proposed model suggests that these interventions are unlikely to yield high rates of success—if students make uncontrollable attributions, they are not going to be interested or motivated to attend seminars or apply seminar skills. An alternate approach would be to focus on attributions first. Noel, Forsyth, & Kelley (1987) selected a group of students who were failing a course at midterm; students who viewed a video tape that modeled internal-controllable attributions for failure ("it was my fault because I did not study

enough") earned higher grades in the course than students who did not receive any attributional training.

It is possible that students who are required to attend remedial tutoring sessions or attend workshops (for study skills or time-management) view these as additional external forces controlling their behaviors. In these cases, students are not actively taking control of their academic lives. If however, we focus on getting students to take responsibility by making internal-controllable attributions, they may be more likely to improve their study habits or seek additional help. These are important questions for future research.

In developing a plan for academic probation, this model encourages colleges to carefully explore precursors to academic probation and pay attention to student's immediate reactions, primarily focusing on cognitive processes. It is hoped that this model will generate research to test its basic assumptions and applicability.

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