
John Stewart Swift, Jr.

ACADEMIC PROBATION, SUSPENSION, AND THE ADULT STUDENT

This article provides the results of a study completed at a major urban university. The research was meant to answer some of the questions about adults who experience academic difficulty. The article also includes the results of a special intervention program created after data were analyzed.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Some writers have described the characteristics of older students who are returning to college (Galliano and Gildea, 1982). Others have compared those characteristics to ones of traditional-aged students to provide insights to the unique needs of adults (Marple, 1976; Johnson, Wallace, and Sedlacek, 1979). A few authors have discussed what adults perceive as the barriers to entering and succeeding in college (Gilbert, Manning, and Ponder, 1981; Richter and Witten, 1984), while others have discussed the fact that adults are enrolling in college — but are not all staying (DeDin, 1979; Reedhling, 1980). The reasons given for withdrawal, however, usually do not include the problem of satisfactory academic progress (Malin, Bray, Dougherty, and Skinner, 1980; Hemmingway, 1981).

Researchers have reported the results of working with students who are considered probationary for academic reasons. Cuvo, Freeman, Canavin, and Bryson (1986) reported on the use of "friendly" versus "authoritarian" letters sent to students as notification of their academic status. They also provided data regarding the effects of required counseling appointments for individuals in academic difficulty. A related article (Hudesman, Avramiees, Loveday, Wendell, and Griemsmann, 1986) also provided the results of structured counseling sessions for students who were on academic probation. Both studies concluded that authoritarian approaches and required meetings provided better results than a friendly letter and leaving the scheduling of an appointment to the student. The authoritarian approach may work with traditional-aged students, but does it have similar effects with adults?

Students who either leave an institution of their own volition or are asked to withdraw due to poor academic performance may wish to return. The enrollment of academically deficient students was addressed in a study completed by Taylor, Powers, Lindstrom, and Gibson (1987). Students seeking readmission after being dismissed either for academic reasons or for continued academic probation were required to have a meeting with an advisor to assess their attitudes about continuing their studies. Those who were to readmit signed a contract in which conditions for readmission were spelled out. Conditions included required career counseling, assignment to a specific advisor, tutoring to improve skills, a limit to the number of hours

★ JOHN STEWART SWIFT, JR., is the associate dean of University College and adjunct assistant professor of Humanities in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Toledo.

they could be employed, and achievement of a minimal GPA. While such a contract and specified conditions might be usable with traditional-aged students, will adults sign a contract and adhere to specified conditions for enrollment?

Students in academic difficulty, according to Nespor and Roueche (1983), drop, withdraw from, or fail a greater number of courses. They tend, also, to offer more excuses for their academic problems. According to Matley (1979), the granting of a withdrawal saves face for the student doing poorly because the instructor does not have to give a grade of "D" or "F." But do older students who are experiencing academic difficulty drop or withdraw from classes for academic reasons?

How long students in academic difficulty will continue enrollment once notified of poor academic performance is another question. Gash, Hillesheim, and Winegar (1982) found that initial retention of students placed on academic probation was high. Sixty-six percent registered for the semester following the one in which they were placed on academic probation, but only half of those who initially registered completed the subsequent term of enrollment. Will adults in academic difficulty follow a similar pattern of enrollment?

One group of older students that has received attention regarding academic progress is college transfers. Researchers have reviewed the success of community college transfers (Nolan, and Hall, 1978; Phlegar, Andrew, and McLaughlin, 1981; Holahan, Green, and Kelley, 1983). The results of their research indicated that it was not uncommon for these students to suffer "transfer shock" or an initial drop in their grade point average (GPA). After one or more terms their GPAs returned to a level equal to or better than what they had achieved in earning their associate degrees. Graham and Dallam (1986) reviewed the academic status of 345 transfer students in academic difficulty. They concluded that all transfer students entering baccalaureate degree programs were more likely to be placed on academic probation than native students. Reasons for this included student motivation, prior academic experience, transfer shock, a more competitive academic environment, unwillingness to seek help, and the impersonal nature of a large institution. Do adults, as transfer students, display characteristics similar to both two-year and four-year college transfers?

The nature of the institution may affect academic progress of some students in academic difficulty, but intervention programs can also affect them. Whether such programming is helpful, however, is questionable. MacArthur (1976) indicated that special programming is helpful, while Robinson (1978) concluded the opposite. It appears that the success of such programming might depend on its nature, the method of application, and the population in question (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Cuvo et al., 1986; Hudesman et al., 1986; Patrick, Furlow, and Donovan, 1988).

The majority of college students maintain a status of "satisfactory progress," but others are considered to be either in "probation" or in "suspension" status for academic reasons. When considering older students, how many achieve which status, once in a status do their GPAs continue to fall, and how long do they remain in that status? How long will adults experiencing academic difficulty remain enrolled? Will they, in addition to failing courses, drop and/or withdraw from classes; and do they feel that they were caught in circumstances beyond their control? Finally, will intervention help these students raise their GPA, and are there specific intervention prescriptions that are more successful when working with adults?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Location of This Study

The adults who were the subjects of this study were all enrolled as students of University College. The college is one of eight at The University of Toledo. In the fall of 1988 the university enrolled slightly less than 20,000 undergraduates, 47 percent, of whom were age 23 and older. University College enrolled 1,179 students in the fall of 1988, of whom 86 percent were age 23 and older (Office of Institutional Research, 1988).

The Population of This Study

The population of this study included 535 students who were in either **probation** or in suspension status during an eight-year period. Seventy-seven percent of them were older students whose average age was 29.7 years at the time they first got into academic difficulty and became subjects of this study.

The population was composed of two-year college transfers — those students who had transferred from area community colleges as well as from the university's own community college; four-year college transfers — people who came from a variety of four-year institutions; and native students — those who matriculated in baccalaureate programs at this University. The number of students who came from two-year colleges was 309 (58 percent), transfers from four-year institutions numbered 47 (9 percent), and native students totaled 179 (33 percent). A majority attended the university part-time (65 percent) and most were employed. The group of 535 was composed of 346 (65 percent) men and 189 (35 percent) women.

Data Collection and Analysis

Transcripts of all University College students listed by the university records office as having been either in academic probation or in suspension status during years 1982-83, 83-84, 84-85, 85-86, 86-87, and 87-88 were reviewed. It was discovered that for 8 percent of the 535 students poor achievement was first recorded in 1979-80, so an academic progress "history" for each person from that year through 1987-88 was constructed. Data were analyzed beginning with academic year 1980-81.

For each quarter the following data were collected: the student's academic status (probation, suspension, or GPA above a 2.0, i.e., satisfactory progress); the student's GPA; and the number of hours the student dropped (D), withdrew from (W), failed (F), and completed. The last quarter of enrollment and cumulative GPA for each person was noted. (For students who achieved a 2.0 GPA, the quarter when it was achieved was considered their "last quarter" unless their GPA fell below a 2.0 in a subsequent quarter during which this study was conducted.) Also recorded was whether the individual was a two-year college transfer, four-year college transfer, or native student.

The first phase of this study (academic years 1979-85) was done to determine how many students continued in academic difficulty, how many raised their GPA to at least a 2.0, how many made their own decision to withdraw, and how many were terminated by the college. The second phase of this study (academic years 1985-88), while providing three years of additional data to what had been previously collected, analyzed the intervention program instituted after the first phase to determine whether it was successful.

RESULTS

Displayed in Table 1 for the 535 students are GPA and years of enrollment data for the statuses suspension, probation, and achieved a 2.0 GPA. The data are provided for each category of students — two-year transfers, four-year transfers, and native students — and are provided for each of the years — one through eight. There are two pieces of data provided for each year. The first is the number of students who were enrolled for that specific number of academic years. The second is the average GPA of all of those students who were enrolled for that number of years.

The data in Table 1 reveal that the majority of students in academic difficulty transferred from community colleges. Also revealed is that permitting students to remain enrolled for several years does not necessarily cause the GPA in each succeeding year to rise. At the time the data were collated for the eighth year, 177 students were in suspension status (33 percent), 166 in probation status (31 percent), and 192 had raised their GPA to a 2.0 or better (36 percent).

Table 2 displays the number of students who were enrolled annually in each of the eight years. The numbers are given for each academic year, 1979-80 through 1987-88 (except for 1987-88 where the first year was not totaled). The total number who remained enrolled from one successive year to the next, for years one through eight, are also provided. Finally, the percents of those who remained enrolled from one year to the next year, one through eight, are also given.

The compilation of data in Table 2 indicates that each year the college enrolled an average of 67 students who, in their first year, were in academic difficulty.

Evening students numbered 593 (51 percent) of the 1,179 enrolled in University College in the fall of 1988 (Office of Institutional Research, 1988). Like the total enrollment of the college, over half of the individuals in this study were night students. The 535 individuals in this study enrolled for an average of 8.75 quarter hours of classes each term. Not only was this number above the average for all evening students at the university (6.09 hours), it was close to the number nontraditional day students enrolled for, which was 10.88 quarter hours per term (Office of Institutional Research, 1988).

The rate of course completion was not equal to what these students believed they could accomplish. Table 3 provides data about the number of students who enrolled in classes and the number of hours from which they dropped (D) and /or withdrew (W). Also included in the table are the number of hours students failed (F), the number they completed, and the percent each category represents of the total number of hours for which all the students initially enrolled.

Data in Table 3 reveal that the students in academic difficulty regularly enrolled for more course work than they could complete. They completed 69 percent of the hours for which they enrolled. At the same time, they withdrew from or dropped 17 percent and failed 14 percent of the hours for which they registered.

Table 1*Students Achieving Less than a 2.0 GPA*

Type of student	Successive Years	The Three Academic Statuses of The Students		
		Suspension	Probation	2.000 GPA
Two-Year College Transfers	1	19—1.531	56—0.951	25—2.261
	2	37—1.570	36—1.587	44—2.290
	3	24—1.743	11—1.425	26—2.129
	4	7—1.686	3—1.893	13—2.087
	5	5—1.882	0	6—2.077
	6	1—1.894	1—1.727	0
	7	1—1.863	0	0
	8	0	0	0
Totals		94	107	114 n=315
% Of 535				58.87%
Four-Year College Transfers	1	3—1.383	13—1.004	7—2.605
	2	2—0.819	5—1.655	6—2.336
	3	2—1.506	0	3—2.490
	4	1—1.778	1—1.820	0
	5	0	0	0
	6	0	0	1—2.076
	7	0	0	0
	8	0	0	0
Totals		8	19	17 n=44
% Of 535				8.22%
Native Students	1	28—1.566	22—1.344	17—2.373
	2	23—1.706	12—1.644	23—2.208
	3	14—1.685	4—1.683	15—2.168
	4	5—1.719	1—1.988	5—2.190
	5	5—1.760	1—1.400	1—2.000
	6	0	0	0
	7	0	0	0
	8	0	0	0
Totals		75	40	61 n=176
% Of 535				32.89%
Grand Totals		177	166	192 N=535

Table 2*Annual Enrollment of Students in Academic Difficulty*

Academic Years	Successive Years of Enrollment							
	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Eight
1987-88	N/A	31	23	7	5	1	1	0
1986-87	50	53	15	8	1	1	0	—
1985-86	72	43	20	4	5	2	—	—
1984-85	88	41	20	14	10	—	—	—
1983-84	71	49	26	17	1	—	—	—
1982-83	75	47	33	8	—	—	—	—
1981-82	82	53	15	—	—	—	—	—
1980-81	54	29	—	—	—	—	—	—
1979-80	43	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Totals	535	346	152	58	22	4	1	0
% Continued	1 to 2	2 to 3	3 to 4	4 to 5	5 to 6	6 to 7	7 to 8	
Year To Year	64.7%	43.9%	38.2%	37.9%	18.2%	25.0%	00.0%	

Table 3.*Number of Hours Dropped, Withdrawn From, and of Earned F.**The Number of Hours Earned, and the Average Number of Hours in Each Category.*

No. Students	No. Hrs. Dropped	No. Hrs. Withdrawn	No. Hrs. Of Fs	No. Hrs. Earned	Avg. No. Hrs.	% Of Total Enrolled Hrs.
344	1,774				5.16	9.21%
279		1,535			5.50	7.97%
540			2,686		4.97	14.00%
1,713				13,255	7.74	68.85%
Totals						
2,201				19,250	8.75	100.0%

NOTE: The "totals" number of students does not equal the sum of the number of students for each category as the same student could be included within each category. The "totals" number of students is a headcount.

DISCUSSION

The older students enrolled for an average of 8.75 hours per quarter over the eight-year period. Consequently, their progress through a 15-hour increment was one that could take more than one academic year. The policies of the University in regard to academic difficulty and the 93 attempted hour rule included *only the hours attempted as a student enrolled at this university!* These policies were meant to serve what was once primarily a traditional-aged student body. A consequence of this policy was that transfers who entered the university received "forgiveness" for poor past academic performance because they had up to 93 hours to attempt before they might be suspended. This is an important factor in understanding why students persisted for so long when they encountered academic difficulty. Students can achieve a university GPA high enough to keep them from being suspended but which is below a 2.0. The result of this situation was the enrollment of students who had very low GPAs and continued to take classes for years.

At the same time, the rule did not favor native students or transfers from the University's own community and technical college for whom there was no academic forgiveness. All their attempted hours counted toward their academic status. Consequently, those who entered University College from either the two-year or another four-year college of the University and had only a 2.0 (or slightly higher) GPA ended up not on probation but on academic suspension after completing just one or two courses, when they earned grades of "D" and/or "F."

From 1980-81 through 1984-85 all students who were classified as being in academic probation status were sent a letter to notify them of this fact. Advisors were asked to review the records of their advisees who had a GPA below a 2.0 and indicate what action should be taken. This procedure was brought to an end after four years because while advisors were "sure" students could be counseled to improve their records, data revealed that this did not happen. Students who could be suspended were sent warning letters by registered mail indicating what they needed to do to achieve acceptable academic standing. Meetings were required of students in academic suspension status. Requests for such meetings were made in the letters and registration forms were held until the meetings took place.

Letters and meetings, while providing a formal method of notification, warning, and assistance, did not reduce the number of individuals in academic difficulty. Some students refused to accept the letters, and many circumvented the required meeting. Those who did meet with an advisor were counseled, but no ultimatums were issued to those students.

After the completion of the first phase of this study, a new intervention program was instituted. First, all letters warning of probation and/or suspension were rewritten to include the results of the initial phase of this study. Those results indicated that most students who experienced academic difficulty did not improve their academic records and discontinued enrollment of their own accord. The new letters sent to those on probation and suspension were more effective. The use of authoritative notification is supported by Cuvo (1986). Second, in order to address the "academic forgiveness" provided transfers, those who could be suspended were given their next quarter of enrollment to earn a 2.5 GPA or they were not permitted to enroll the following quarter. This gave the student the second chance that advisors had previously provided. But the second chance was for one quarter. The concept of specifying requirements which those in academic difficulty must meet to be in good academic standing is supported by Gash (1982). Third, students were forced to meet with the dean or associate dean by having their registration held up or voided. Those who previously had not come in for required appointments appeared because they could not take any classes until they had a meeting. This approach is supported by Hudesman (1986). Fourth, students who indicated that poor grades were caused by external factors or were inappropriately earned

were required to file petitions for grade deletions or repeat courses and have grades dropped. This caused students to take action and either raise their GPA or withdraw from the university. Requiring this action is supported by the work of Nespor and Roueche (1983). Fifth, advisors offered these students additional help which included changing the students' programs of study, securing tutorial assistance, or reducing the course load carried in any given quarter. Prescribing individual treatment for students experiencing academic difficulty is recommended by MacArthur (1976). Sixth, students seeking admission, or readmission after not being enrolled, into the college and who had GPAs below 2.0 were required to sign an agreement of understanding which detailed the expectations which had to be met in order for their enrollment to be continued. This action is recommended by Taylor et al. (1987). Finally, the college suspended students in numbers proportionate to the number of individuals who had already been given a "second chance."

The results of the new intervention program during academic year 1985-86 were as follows. There were 58 suspendable students. Meetings were held with 33 (56.9 percent) of them. Of those students, six (18 percent) achieved a 2.0, nine (27 percent) raised their GPA, and 18 (55 percent) did not raise their GPA after the required meeting. Of the 33, 12 (21 percent) indicated that their GPA reflected circumstances "beyond their control" and were required to petition for grade deletions and/or repeat courses. Seventeen (29.3 percent) of the 58 were suspended from taking classes during 1985-86. This compares to one suspension in all of 1984-85.

During academic years 1986-87 and 1987-88 the policies instituted in the fall of 1985 were continued with refinements meant to support the students in academic difficulty while removing from enrollment those who could not achieve acceptable academic standing. The dean met every quarter with those students who did not achieve a 2.0 GPA and were suspendable. All students categorized as probation or suspension were sent letters. A special letter which was congratulatory in tone was sent to those in academic difficulty who demonstrated improvement. The results show the required meetings, signing of agreements, and special letters appear to have made a difference. Compared to the three years prior to the fall of 1985, 19 percent fewer students were either in probation or in suspension status in their last quarter while 9 percent more achieved a 2.0 GPA and were deleted from the study.

Changes also took place in the number of students who withdrew from classes. The University altered the withdrawal policy in the fall of 1985. Students had to withdraw by mid-term. The average number of University College students who withdrew decreased to 39, but the percent who were in academic difficulty increased to 9 percent. A statistical test of the percent of those in academic difficulty who withdrew prior to 1985-86 and those who did so after 1985-86 was significant (at the .01 level). Does the increased percent of students in academic difficulty who withdrew from courses indicate that students in good academic standing do better planning, see their advisors, or more realistically assess what they can accomplish in a term?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers report that students in academic difficulty who do not make satisfactory academic progress will often elect to withdraw from the program they are pursuing (Gash et al., 1982; Nespor and Roueche, 1983; Bell, 1984). Research about community college transfers indicates that "transfer shock," or a temporary drop in GPA, is a common experience for the two-year degree holder (Nolan and Hall, 1978; Phlegar, Andrew. and McLaughlin, 1981; Holahan, Green, and Kelley, 1983). In the case of the students in this study both factors appear to be in effect.

That is, some of the two-year college students were in academic difficulty for a quarter or two and then achieved a 2.0 GPA. However, for many of the students in probation or suspension status, the experience of poor academic achievement appears to have provided reason to withdraw from the university.

The process of reversing a dropping GPA takes as long or longer than achieving it in the first place. Students should not be permitted to attend a university for years maintaining a GPA below 2.0. The majority of adults in this study who achieved a 2.0 (36 percent) accomplished it within two years (see Table 1). The longer a student is permitted to remain enrolled, the harder it is to dismiss the individual because too much time and money have been invested. Yet, for the student, the amount of "A" and "B" graded work required to achieve good academic standing becomes a barrier of years of courses to be taken when enrolling for one or two classes each term.

While the results of this study permit some conclusions to be drawn about how adults in academic difficulty respond to intervention, further research is needed. Specific to academic advising, follow-up studies regarding the personal problems which adults claim caused them to receive poor grades but were "beyond their control" might provide useful information. Older students are difficult to direct into academic programs they feel are not personally appropriate. But better counseling and pre-enrollment testing to keep students out of programs for which they are not adequately prepared could reduce the numbers in academic difficulty. Better advising might also reduce the numbers who withdraw from classes. Advising when the first quarter of grades below a 2.0 takes place should be implemented. This might be a form of "preventative" counseling. Finally, other methods of intervention might be used depending on the specific population of older students. This university enrolled a majority who were first-generation college students. They were employed, had families, and attended part-time. These circumstances made it difficult to force them to see advisors or the dean, to receive tutoring, or to meet with faculty members for additional help.

Adults, like their traditional counterparts, get themselves into academic difficulty. But due to prior educational experiences, other obligations, and rules written for the traditional student, they need special consideration regarding academic suspension and probation. Any college or university that enrolls adults in degree programs may have some who are not achieving an acceptable grade point average. This can require a review of current institutional policies regarding the treatment of students in academic difficulty. Once this has been done, an intervention program should be developed to offer support and assistance to adult students in academic probation or suspension status.

References

- Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55 (4), 485-540.
- Bell, C., Jr. (1984). Grades as a predictor of attrition. *Community College Review*, 12 (2), 13-19.
- Cuvo, A. J., Freeman, M. M., Canavin, M. B., & Rryson, S. L. (1986). Conditions of appointment compliance for students on academic probation. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 27 (1), 58-64.
- DelDin, B. Z. (1980). A descriptive and analytical study on adult students who voluntarily withdrew from Michigan State University during fall term, 1979. Doctoral Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1980. Dissertation Abstracts *International*, 41, 3836A.
- Facts in Brief. (1987). Percentage of older college students is increasing. *Higher Education & National Affairs*, 36, (9), 3.
- Galliano, G., & Gildea, K. (1982). *Non-traditional students: New faces and new issues*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service NO: ED 216 615).

- Gash, P., Hillesheim, C. A., & Winegar, L. (1982). *Effects of probation policy on student retention at Shasta College: A study in a rural northern California community college*. Shasta College. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service NO: ED 241 094).
- Gilbert, L. A., Manning, L., & Ponder, M. (1981). Conflicts with the student role: A comparison of female and male reentry students. *Journal of NAWDAC*, 44 (1), 26-32.
- Graham, S., & Dallam, J. (1986). Academic probation as a measure of performance: Contrasting transfer students to native students. *Community/Junior College Quarterly of Research & Practice*, 10 (1), 23-33.
- Hemmingway, J. S. (1981). A comparison of the characteristics and perceptions of continuing, new, and non-continuing adult part-time undergraduate students at North Carolina State University. Doctoral Dissertation, North Carolina State University at Raleigh, 1981. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 42, 2969A.
- Holahan, C. K., Green, J. L., & Kelley, H. P. (1983). A six-year longitudinal analysis of transfer student performance and retention. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 24 (4), 305-310.
- Hudesman, J., Avramides, B., Loveday, C., Wendell, A. S., & Griemsmann, R. (1986). Counseling style: Its impact on the academic performance of college students in special programs. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 27 (3), 250-254.
- Johnson, D. H., Wallace, K. W., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1979, Spring). A comparison of the needs of returning and traditional students by sex. *Journal of NAWDAC*, 42, 14-18.
- Malin, J. T., Bray, J. H., Dougherty, T. W., & Skinner, W. K. (1980). Factors affecting the performance and satisfaction of adult men and women attending college. *Research in Higher Education*, 13 (2), 115-130.
- Marple, B. L. (1976). Adult women students compared with younger students on selected personality variables. *Journal of NAWDAC*, 40 (1), 11-15.
- Matley, B. G. (1979). Relationship between grade upon and time of withdrawal for the withdrawer category of continuing students. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 72 (3), 155-159.
- Nespor, J. K., & Roueche, S. D. (1983). Studying attrition by studying probation. *Innovation Abstracts*, 5 (34), (ERIC Document Reproduction Service NO: ED 237 181).
- Nolan, E. J., & Hall, D. L. (1978). Academic performance of the community college transfer student: A five-year follow-up study. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 19 (6), 543-548.
- Office of Institutional Research. *The University of Toledo Adult Student Information*. Toledo, Ohio: The University of Toledo, December, 1988.
- Patrick, J., Furlow, J. W., & Donovan, S. (1988). Using a comprehensive academic intervention program in the retention of high-risk students. *NACADA Journal*, 8 (1), 29-34.
- Phlegar, A. G., Andrew, L. D., & McLaughlin, G. W. (1981). Explaining the academic performance of community college transfer students who transfer to a senior institution. *Research in Higher Education*, 15 (2), 99-108.
- Reehling, J. E. (1980). They are returning: But are they staying? *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 21 (6), 491-497.
- Richter, D. L., & Witten, C. H. (1984). Barriers to adult learning: Does anticipation match reality? *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25 (5), 465-467.
- Taylor, D. V., Powers, S. M., Lindstrom, W. A., & Gibson, T. S. (1987). Academically deficient readmitted students: Are they really a high risk? *NACADA Journal*, 7 (1), 41-47.