Academic Probation: How Students Navigate and Make Sense of their Experiences

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Abstract

This study explores how students on academic probation navigate and make sense of their experiences at one university. Quantitative methods were used to determine what student characteristics were most overrepresented on probation. Qualitative methods were used to identify student experiences and challenges and how students were navigating their probationary placement. Demographic characteristics of students who were overrepresented on probation included students who were: male; of lower prior academic achievement; early in their college career; ethnic or racial minorities; first-generation college students; transfers; low-income; and over the age of 24. The primary reasons cited for academic difficulties included under-preparedness or lacking academic success strategies appropriate for college-level academic work. Additional experiences that contributed to students' overall difficulty in college included: institutional and instructional challenges; lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences; reluctance to seek help; lack of knowledge or use of support services; interference from disabilities; financial challenges; family, personal, or social challenges; and extended absences. Three issues stood out as particular concerns regarding the efforts to improve student success and retention: the complex and unique web of challenges that each student faced; reluctance to seek help on the part of many students; and the intense reaction by some to their lack of academic progress. Recommendations are offered for consideration, including assisting students with the development of academic success strategies, addressing institutional and instructional challenges, improving advising and mentoring practices, and implementing a mandatory probationary intervention program.

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Chapter One: Literature Review

Over the last 150 years, the United States has seen great growth in the number of people seeking higher education. Initiatives such as the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, GI Bill, Civil Rights Act, financial aid, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 have made a college education more accessible (Seidman, 2005). Economic conditions including an increasingly more industrialized and technological society have made a college education more desirable, as increasing numbers of professions require a college education. Currently, six out of every ten jobs in the U.S. require some post-secondary education (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). Subsequently, more individuals are enrolling in colleges and universities to obtain skills and knowledge to improve their lives and chances of employment. However, not all students with college aspirations are immediately successful.

Colleges and universities can expect that on average one out of every four freshmen will drop out or transfer before making it to their sophomore year (Carey, 2004). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2009), only 58% of first-time degree-seeking students who attend a 4-year university will graduate from that institution. When students who transfer are accounted for as well, still only 63% of all college students will earn a degree within six years (Brennan, Grayson, & Holmes, 2004; Carey, 2004; Rotherham, 2008). Students, parents, and legislators have put increasing pressure on colleges and universities to improve retention and graduation rates. Loss of income and loss of confidence from these stakeholders coupled with the high costs of student recruitment has prompted researchers to investigate the causes of poor academic performance and to study ways to improve student retention rates.

Some students enter college with the goal of skill acquisition or personal or professional enrichment. These students may never intend to complete a degree. However, many students

intend to complete a degree, yet leave college before earning one due to financial reasons, personal reasons, or academic reasons. These students may not be immediately successful in college and may find themselves on academic probation. Many of these students are forced to leave college because of their lack of success and some choose to leave before incurring the stigma of "flunking out" of college. It is the retention of these unsuccessful students that is the primary focus of this research.

Typically, students who achieve a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 or less (on a 4.0 scale) are subject to academic probation. Depending on the university's policies, probation may lead to suspension within one or two semesters if the student's GPA is not increased to above the 2.0 level. Some institutions will also place a student on probation if they are not making sufficient progress, for example if they withdraw from courses semester after semester. Nearly 25% of all college students will be on academic probation at some point in their college careers and roughly 50% of these probationary students will voluntarily drop out (Damashek, 2003).

This literature review begins by outlining the key indicators of students who are at risk of dropping out of college and the multiple causes that contribute to academic failure. After describing Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure, an overview of the many efforts to improve student retention is provided. Retention initiatives for probationary students are described in detail including the level of obligation, focus, and format of these programs. Finally, other retention initiatives are noted, but with less detail provided due to the scope of this study.

This literature review provides the context which frames research questions regarding the population of students on academic probation at one university. Institutions are encouraged to analyze their student population and practices in order to assess whether current retention efforts

are sufficient or if improvements are warranted (Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). This proposed study is one small step in that process.

Students on academic probation at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP) will be studied in order to obtain a better understanding of the population and their experiences. At UWSP there is no formal retention program specifically for students on probation. Determining a demographic profile of probationary students and understanding the educational and probationary experiences of these students will help to inform the university about what current organization and communication practices are helping this population. It will also inform the institution about possible organization and communication changes that could improve the educational and probationary experiences of students and better help them succeed.

Indicators and Causes of Academic Probation

Educational researchers have attempted to determine a profile of college students who are at risk of academic failure. They may have low high school GPAs, low socioeconomic status, be ethnic minorities, have low scores on college placements tests, or have lower grades in previous math, English, or science courses (Damashek, 2003; Johnson, Deming-Hodapp, & Johnsen, 2005; Lee, 2008; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Santa Rita & Scranton, 2001; Tovar & Simon, 2006). For non-native English speakers, lower Combined English Language Skills Assessment (CELSA) scores may also be a factor (Damashek, 2003). These indicators may be used by institutions as possible predictors to determine which students might struggle in college.

Multiple studies cited by Robert Reason (2009) indicate that the most significant indicator of risk of academic failure is student ability and both past and present academic performance are hypothesized to influence a student's decision to leave or stay in college (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Tinto, 1993). Students of lower ability are twice as likely

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to withdraw from college as students with higher ability (Tinto, 1993). Institutions reporting high averages of college entrance examination scores for their students had an average first- to second-year retention rate of greater than 91%, whereas institutions with the lowest average scores, had retention rates closer to 56% (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999).

Socioeconomic status is also used as an indicator of risk of academic failure. Students of low socioeconomic status are 60% more likely to leave college before completing a degree (Tinto, 1993). Low-income students have a six-year graduation rate of only 54%, compared to 77% of high-income students (Brennan, Grayson, & Holmes, 2004; Carey, 2004; Rotherham, 2008). This may be due to financial difficulties rather than (or in addition to) lack of academic ability. Financial pressure may result in academic difficulties if a student prioritizes a job over academics.

Race can also be used as an indicator of potential risk. Hispanic, Black, and Native American students are more likely than Caucasian students to withdraw from college before completing a degree (Tinto, 1993). The six-year graduation rate for Hispanic students is 49%, for Black students 42%, and for Native American students only 40% as compared to white students at 60% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). These minority groups often have lower socioeconomic status and therefore may leave college for financial reasons.

It is important to note how indicators such as ability, race, and socioeconomic status work together. Low-income individuals, who are often minorities, are less likely to have had quality, pre-college educational experiences as they often come from schools with limited resources and under-qualified teachers. Therefore they may enter college in the lower ability rankings.

It is also important to note that indicators such as race and socioecomic status are not the causes of academic failure, but that these populations often face unique challenges that can result

in academic difficulty or failure. Additionally, some students do not possess any of the above indicators, yet find themselves on academic probation. Educational researchers have been able to determine a profile of those who are likely to be successful in college and of those who may experience academic difficulty or failure. They have found it much more difficult to determine a central cause for academic failure.

Several causes may contribute to lack of academic success for students with and without the above indicators. A lack of direction may be a factor (Damashek, 2003; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). For example, even academically well-prepared students may be unsure of their long-term career or personal goals. Tinto (1993) noted that less than one-third of entering freshmen are very sure of their educational and occupational goals. This uncertainty may lead a student to select a college or major that is inappropriate. Some may enroll in too many credit hours, underestimating the amount of work required to be successful. They may also lack knowledge about the relationship between course content and prerequisites or about requirements for transferring credits or degree completion. In addition, some students enroll in college not by their own initiative, but because it is a priority of a family member or someone close to them.

Students may also lack academic success strategies to be successful in college (Balduf, 2009; Damashek, 2003; Johnson, Deming-Hodapp, & Johnsen, 2005; Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2006) For example, they may fail to set short-term goals to complete assignments or readings, lack time management skills, have poor study skills, and prioritize other activities over coursework. Some students display an external locus of control, blaming external factors for their lack of success. Students may fail to assume responsibility for their own learning, believing that job interference or poor instruction caused their lack of success.

Students may be affected by psychological interferences or skill deficiencies (Balduf, 2009; Damashek, 2003; Holland, 2006; Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2006; Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2004; Nance, 2007; Tinto, 1993). For example, they may be having difficulty adjusting to the new culture of the college or be experiencing family or relationship difficulties. They may have low self-confidence or have diagnosed or undiagnosed illnesses such as depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder. Some students may be deficient in reading, math, or other skills required for courses or programs. These deficiencies may be gaps in education. They may also be the result of learning-related disabilities or other disabilities such as ADD/ADHD (attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), traumatic brain injuries, or Aspberger's Syndrome/Autism Spectrum Disorder.

All of the above examples are academic and non-academic challenges that can contribute to academic difficulty. Any one of these factors can contribute to lack of academic success, but in combination, the effect on academic difficulty may be compounded. Issak, Graves, and Mayers (2006) found that students on academic probation identified more areas of difficulty than did students not on probation. Specifically, in their study, students were given a survey that included thirty possible causes of academic difficulty. Probationary students reported experiencing a mean of 8.6 challenges that contributed to their academic difficulties. Procrastination, time management, and motivation raked among the most common. However, while such challenges are not unique to students on academic probation, non-probationary students reported experiencing a mean of only 5.9 challenges from the same list. The addition of two or three challenges may be the tipping point that compounds a student's challenges, impacts their learning, and results in being placed on academic probation.

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There is truly an abundance of possible challenges that can contribute to causing academic difficulty or failure. With so many causes and with the potential for students to be faced with multiple challenges at once, it is easy to see why so many students withdraw from college and why there is no one solution to improve retention. Seidman (2005) states that student retention is an ill-structured problem, with no one specific cause for student departure. Therefore, a multi-theoretical approach is needed to inform and guide institutional practices and retention efforts.

Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Student retention is a large and complex issue that has been studied for decades. Researchers have developed theories and models of retention from the viewpoints of economics, organization, psychology, and sociology. The model that has gained the most notoriety is Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure.

Tinto's (1993) theory states that a student's individual characteristics influence their initial level of commitment to an institution and to the goal of degree completion. In turn, these initial commitments influence the student's integration into the social and academic systems of the institution. Tinto asserts that the more a student integrates socially and academically, the greater will be their subsequent or on-going commitments to the institution and to the goal of degree completion.

More specifically, a student enters the university with various characteristics such as their socioeconomic status, family background, academic ability, high school achievement, pre-college experiences, gender, race or ethnicity, ability to pay for college, and perhaps other traits as well. Together these characteristics all influence a student's initial level of commitment to the institution and initial level of commitment to completing a degree. These commitments can be

said to be the student's motivation, drive, or willingness to invest their time, energy, and resources into earning a degree and earning it at a particular institution.

A student's initial commitment to an institution and commitment to completing a degree influence how well they integrate into the institution academically and socially. According to Tinto (1993), academic integration consists of meeting the standards of the university and identifying with the structure of the academic system. It involves not only intellectual capacity and development, but also the ability to apply that intellect to the daily tasks of college work through successful study skills and behaviors.

Tinto describes social integration as the degree to which the student is compatible with or adjusts to the social systems of the university, both at the university level and at the level of subcultures within the university. The student, at least partially, separates themselves from past associations and patterns of behavior. This might involve less contact with family, high school friends, and other peer groups and instead involves creating new patterns of socialization among faculty, staff, classmates, or fellow students in residence halls. Tinto has found that the more a student integrates both academically and socially, the more they continue to be committed to the institution and to the goal of graduation. Those who find disparity and incongruence between themselves and the social or academic system may find their commitment to the institution or to the goal of obtaining a degree to fade.

While being committed to an institution or to the goal of graduation can help a student persist in college, commitment is not the only factor at play. Tinto (1993) notes that student ability is also an intervening factor and is actually the most likely predictor of a student's potential for success. Variation in commitment and ability can influence student departure from or persistence in higher education. Tinto states that students with moderate to high commitment

and high academic competence are the most likely to persist at the institution and graduate with a degree. Students with moderate to low commitment and high competence may transfer to other colleges or withdraw and re-enroll later. Students with moderate to high commitment and low competence are likely to persist until forced to leave because of failing grades. Students with moderate to low commitment and low competence are most likely to withdraw from college and never re-enroll. Unless institutions perform exit surveys or interviews, they may not know why their students depart.

Tinto's theory requires that students integrate into their new academic and social surroundings in order to persist. Yet, as noted earlier, there are multiple causes that can contribute to academic failure and lack of integration. It is easy to see why so many students experience academic difficulty and why so many solutions have been explored to improve academic success and retention. Despite numerous initiatives and interventions to address lack of academic success, it remains a significant challenge for colleges and universities.

University Responses to Lack of Academic Success

The majority of students enter college in order to complete a course of study, earn a degree, and prepare them for the job world. However, roughly 17% of higher education students do not intend to complete a degree, but rather wish only to complete classes for enrichment purposes (Tinto, 1993). Many of these students are enrolled at two-year institutions or are enrolled part time at four-year institutions. Degree-seeking or not, being placed on academic probation is a formal warning to both student and institutional staff that the student is struggling and not achieving their educational goals.

Several programs and initiatives have been developed and implemented in order to help students be successful and improve retention rates. The effort to improve student success has

been taken up by faculty, advisors, counselors, career centers, offices of health and wellness, residential living offices, athletics departments, dean's offices, and other departments. Moreover, it seems that there are as many approaches to helping students to succeed as there are offices involved in the effort. Since the main focus of this study is students on probation, programs solely for this population are covered in more detail. Retention initiatives for subpopulations, campus-wide initiatives, and other efforts to improve student success are also noted, but will not be described in detail due to the scope of this study.

Programs for Students on Academic Probation

Programs specifically for students on academic probation have the intent of remediation. The student is already in jeopardy and the institution seeks to get them back on track toward success. Retention programs designed to assist probationary students vary in their level of obligation, delivery format, and focus.

Level of Obligation. Programs for probationary students vary in their level of obligation. They are either mandatory or voluntary. The literature may describe this as intrusive or non-intrusive, respectively. The rationale behind mandatory/intrusive programs is twofold. First, students may be unable to properly identify all the possible causes of their difficulties, let alone determine if there are departments on campus that could help them. Second, students experiencing academic difficulty may be reluctant to reach out for assistance (Balduf, 2009; Wright, 2003). Isaak, Graves, & Mayers (2006) note that students in academic jeopardy often have lower social skills, are less trusting, exhibit greater social alienation, and are more anxious in social situations than their counterparts. Therefore, mandatory and intrusive programs are gaining in popularity.

Reluctance to seek help is a legitimate concern as the literature shows that voluntary programs are vastly underutilized. Among the research reviewed for this study, the best usage rate noted for voluntary programs was 40%, reported by Minnesota State University at Mankato (Johnson, Deming-Hodapp, & Johnsen, 2005). MSU's program is not mandatory, but a high expectation exists for student participation. Other studies reported that only between 10%-25% of probationary students chose to voluntarily join a support program (Damashek, 2003) and many of these students did not complete the requirements of the program. This means that most probationary students do not benefit from professional guidance to help them be successful, but rather attempt to resolve their challenges themselves. One study reviewed found that two thirds of students on probation remained on probation until leaving college (City College of San Francisco, 2002). Level of obligation is only the first major delineation in support services for probationary students.

Program Focus. As noted earlier, lack of academic success has multiple causes. Therefore, it is no surprise that the focus of probationary support programs can be extensive. The literature notes the major categories of program focus as an advising/counseling focus, a study skills focus, and a comprehensive focus on both advising/counseling and study skills (Butler, 1999; Damashek, 2003; Humphrey, 2006; Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007).

Programs with an advising or counseling focus tend to involve a student meeting with a counselor or advisor for one or more sessions. These meetings are designed to identify the particular challenges of the student, which might include financial or personal issues in addition to academic challenges. Specific difficulties may be discussed which may prompt the advisor to refer the student to a faculty member, disability services, psychological counseling, career

counseling, financial aid, tutoring, or other services or personnel. A personalized plan of action is created to move the student toward success.

Programs with a study skills focus tend to address issues more closely related to handling coursework. Sessions may address note-taking, test-taking strategies, textbook comprehension, critical thinking, memory strategies, and more. They may also assist the student with adapting learning styles to teaching styles and more effectively managing time by deliberate planning of study sessions and charting out assignments and deadlines. Finally, some programs have a comprehensive focus addressing both advising/counseling needs and study skills issues.

Delivery Format. Regardless of the focus (advising/counseling, study skills, or both), the format of probationary programs varies. Some programs have a one-on-one format where students meet with an advisor or counselor, faculty member, graduate student, or peer mentor (Damashek, 2003; Humphrey, 2006; Nance, 2007). This format has the potential to look deeper into a student's situation to identify their specific needs. For example, the student's transcript may be reviewed to assure proper courses are selected based on their previous experience with a subject. The student may be guided to enroll in fewer credit hours if they have other commitments such as employment, sports, family responsibilities, or particularly challenging courses. Personal challenges are easier to discuss in one-on-one meetings which then allow for counseling or referrals to other appropriate resources. One-on-one programs reviewed tended to focus more on advising/counseling issues. If study skills were addressed, it was usually to a lesser extent. It is possible that this was due to other campus resources being available for study skills help or perhaps it was too time-intensive for an advisor or counselor to address.

Some programs use a small group format that may be led by an advisor or counselor, faculty member, graduate student, or peer mentor. Some had a combination of these individuals

working as a team to facilitate a small group. In a group format, the number of meetings ranged from just one or two held at the beginning of the semester, to upward of eight or more sessions that were weekly or bi-weekly throughout the semester. Groups that met for multiple sessions allowed students to feel like they were not alone in their academic difficulty and allowed them to develop a social network of support. Students offered encouragement to each other in meetings as they shared their experiences about appointments with professors or about having success with a strategy they had learned in the group. Programs with a group format tended to focus more on study skills than on advising/counseling needs.

Some programs for probationary students combined the two formats. Group meetings were supplemented with opportunities for students to meet with the group facilitator individually. These combination formats tended to also have a comprehensive focus addressing study skills mostly in the group and addressing advising/counseling needs in the individual meetings with the facilitator.

The most effective programs were those that were most intrusive (Humphrey, 2006; Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2004; Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2006). These programs were mandatory, had a comprehensive focus of counseling/advising and study skills, and combined formats of group and one-on-one meetings. This was especially true when group size was kept relatively small, such as 12 or fewer participants and the number of meetings was greater than eight.

The Strategies for Academic Success Program[i] at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is just such a program that has a comprehensive focus (advising/counseling and study skills), combined delivery format (small group and one-on-one meetings), and is mandatory. The program is required for all probationary students or else they are withdrawn from courses and suspended. There is a strict, no absence attendance policy as well. The

retention rate of probationary students was 40% before the intensive intervention program was in place and 58% after (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). Because all probationary students are required to attend, not necessarily just the motivated ones who may seek help voluntarily, it suggests that the Strategies for Academic Success Program contributes to the increased success of probationary students at UNC-G. Kamphoff et al. (2007) also note that test group subjects who completed the mandatory probation intervention increased their GPA by .7309 on average, compared to a control group who were just above the probation level who increased by only .4202. This greater achievement may mean the difference between staying in school and dropping out.

The effectiveness of such a program is likely due to addressing multiple causes of difficulty and helping students to build a dynamic support structure that includes communication with staff and other students. Both the social and academic integration needs that Tinto (1993) emphasized are being met. Additionally, the mandatory nature of the program at UNC-G encourages social integration for many students who might otherwise remain in social isolation. Damashek (2003) states that institutions have adopted mandatory programs in order to force socially isolated and reluctant students to find solutions to their academic, financial, and personal challenges.

Initiatives for Subpopulations

A campus may focus on the unique needs of specific subpopulations if such students are found to be overrepresented as experiencing academic difficulty compared to the general student body. For example, programs may be culturally sensitive and designed specifically for minority students, adult students, first-generation college students, low-income students, student athletes,

or freshmen. Some programs work with these subpopulations of students, whether they are on probation or not, in an attempt to improve retention.

Students on probation are often disproportionately minority students and students of low socio-economic status. Nance (2007) noted that in the Goals in Action program at the University of California at San Diego, black students made up only 1% of the student body, yet made up 7% of the students on probation. In the same study, Hispanic students made up 27% of the student body, yet 37% of the students on probation. Tovar and Simon (2006) note that first-generation and minority students often have greater family responsibilities than other students. Subsequently, transition to college life may be difficult for minority students as they are often forced to negotiate two different worlds and communicate in two languages—the language of the academy and the language of home. These students may also be expected to contribute to the family financially and the demands of employment may impact their academics.

Successful programs for these students had a comprehensive focus addressing their multiple needs. Support programs that provide such things as counseling, advising, tutoring, study skills, and time management are very important to meeting the needs of at-risk populations such as minority students. Additionally, they can provide the much needed social support that minority students need to integrate into the university where minorities are often underrepresented.

Student athletes are one subpopulation being served with special support programs that has raised controversy and prompted philosophical discussions on some campuses. Admission standards for colleges and universities have been relaxed in recent years (Damashek, 2003). However, standards of the National Collegiate Athletic Association have increased and teams that fail to meet minimum academic cutoffs lose scholarships (Wolverton, 2008). This has

prompted some athletics departments to secure millions of dollars in support from generous corporate and private donors to build facilities and organize programs to assist athletes with academic success. The controversy is about whether it is ethical to raise such large sums of money to help only student athletes who often receive scholarships, when such money could be used to assist all students. Playing favorites to particular subpopulations is a concern that some colleges and universities have grappled with.

Comprehensive Campus-wide Initiatives

Some colleges and universities have taken a comprehensive approach to student success. Bridges (2008) describes how four universities brought about campus-wide cultural changes to increase engagement and retention among all students by helping them navigate campus processes and services, rather than implementing programs only for probationary students or subpopulations. These colleges carefully assessed their student body by participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in order to identify needs. They then engaged in detailed planning to address critical retention and engagement issues. Several solutions were implemented as a result.

In some situations offices providing support services were physically relocated to be near each other. This allowed students easy access to needed services and eliminated bureaucratic runaround across campus. It also allowed greater communication and increased referrals between the offices. In other cases, service hours were extended to meet the needs of more students such as part-time, transfer, and evening students. These populations were not utilizing support services as much as other populations and showed higher levels of attrition. Telephone and on-line systems to inform students about support services were also implemented, providing students with a one-stop-shop for appropriate referrals to services and locations of resources.

Perhaps the greatest cultural change was described by Bridges (2008) and came about after data showed that many faculty members were unaware of available services and often gave students inaccurate or incomplete information. These campuses undertook massive cross-training efforts of faculty and staff about the breadth and scope of services available to students. At Jackson State University new faculty members were paired with an academic advisor during their first year on campus in order to gain a greater understanding of advising and of available services (Bridges, 2008). Training for existing faculty was also implemented along with massive public relations campaigns educating all campus community members about student affairs offices and services. These efforts allowed faculty to improve the quality and quantity of appropriate referrals provided to their students and advisees.

Preliminary results of such comprehensive efforts are impressive. Jackson State University noted a 46% increase in the number of students using tutorial services and a 79% increase in the number of students using advising and counseling services (Bridges, 2008). This campus also notes short-term increases in retention and graduation rates, although unfortunately the article did not provide specific rates. It is difficult to determine whether services such as a phone or on-line referral systems have an impact on measurable outcomes such as increased GPA or student retention. However, satisfaction surveys of these systems have been positive.

Campus-wide cultural changes have an impact on increasing use of services, student engagement, and retention. Far-reaching efforts such as office relocation, public relations efforts, and wide-spread and in-depth faculty and staff training address retention for all students. Such endeavors avoid the controversy of assisting specific subpopulations such as minority students or student athletes to the exclusion of other students and help to take away any stigma that may be

attached to "needing" support services. It may be necessary to revitalize or renew campus-wide commitments to these priorities and to advance a culture of collaboration and student success.

Other Retention Initiatives

Numerous efforts exist to help students be successful and to improve retention rates. Unfortunately, the scope of this study will not allow for an in-depth description of them all. A few are briefly mentioned here. Academic integration needs are addressed by early alert systems (that notify a student mid-term if they are performing below expectations), developmental or remedial courses, writing-intensive courses, and reconfiguring difficult courses (such as changing prerequisites, dividing one course into two courses, and/or changing delivery of content). Mentoring programs, student organizations, and block scheduling (where a group of students take several courses together) seek to address the social integration needs of students. Orientation programs, learning communities, summer transition programs, service-learning, freshman experience programs, and freshman seminars strive to improve both the academic as well as the social integration of students.

Many departments and programs strive to help students reach their academic goals. For example, financial aid offices are critical to helping students finance their education. Counseling services help students with many academic and personal problems. Career service offices are vital to helping undecided students identify their strengths and interests, educating them about potential careers, and helping them select a possible course of study. Tutoring services help students master specific course content, develop writing skills, and improve study strategies and test-taking skills. It is often heard on college campuses that student retention is everybody's job.

There are multiple retention efforts in place at every institution of higher education. But are students experiencing academic difficulty (who are perhaps the most likely to drop out) using

them? When nationally fewer than 25% of students on probation choose to join structured programs specifically marketed to them to help them be successful, one has to wonder how they are navigating their academic and probationary experience. Furthermore, some campuses do not have programs designed for probationary students, although they surely have other initiatives meant to help students academically and socially. How are students at these universities responding to their probationary status? These are the questions that motivate this study.

Profile of University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP) is a mid-sized, Mid-western university. The university serves approximately 8,600 undergraduate students. The majority of students come from small towns and communities with fewer than 50,000 people. The university is seeking to improve its current retention rate. While UWSP does not currently have a program specifically designed for students on academic probation, other retention efforts are in place. For example, the Multicultural Resource Center provides an outreach specialist who connects with minority students, a space for socialization and studying, access to computers, and funds free tutoring for all minority students who choose to participate. Residential Living staff reach out to students living in the residence halls (including those on probation) to provide academic and social integration needs including connecting students to resources and offering other support. Additionally, Residential Living supports a Freshman Interest Group program. The Tutoring-Learning Center is used by 20% of the student body and provides over 13,000 hours of tutorials each year.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study is one small step toward analyzing students at UWSP who are experiencing academic difficulty. Because academic achievement and retention are closely tied, students on

academic probation are a population at risk of departing the institution. This study may help to identify how the institution can communicate with students on probation to help them persist in college.

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of students on probation at UWSP in order to generate a theoretical model of communication and organizational practices that could improve the academic success of this population. The study will be guided by two primary research questions.

RQ 1. How are students on probation at UWSP making sense of their educational and social experiences?

RQ 2. How are students on probation at UWSP navigating their probationary experiences? In addition to these guiding questions, the demographic composition of UWSP students on academic probation will also be described. Results may lead to the development of actionable interventions and communication strategies that may help probationary students to succeed in their coursework, persist in college, and graduate with a degree.

Chapter Two: Method

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in this study. Quantitative

research methods were used to determine the demographic composition of the population of

students on academic probation during fall semester 2009 at UWSP. Qualitative research

methods are useful to identify the perspectives of individuals. Therefore, grounded theory

research methods were used in this study. The goal was to reveal how students made sense of

their experiences related to academics, socialization, and academic probation. For the purposes

of this study, grounded theory is defined as theory generated from data systematically obtained

and analyzed through the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007). Methods used involved

identifying a range of themes or categories in the data, identifying a central theme, and

generating theory regarding the probationary student experience.

Participants

During the fall semester of 2009, there were 8,635 undergraduate students at UWSP. Of

these, 683 (8%) were placed on probation due to their fall 2009 grades. A total of twenty UWSP

undergraduate students were interviewed for this study. Table 1 gives a brief comparison of the

demographics for the entire undergraduate student body, the population of students on probation,

and the sample of the 20 students interviewed in order to put them in context. A more elaborate

demographic analysis and comparison is provided in the results section of this study.

Of the undergraduate student body in fall of 2009, 48% were male and 52% were female.

Of the 683 students on probation, 65% were male and 35% were female. This mirrored the 20

students interviewed with 13 (65%) being male and 7 (35%) being female. Undergraduates

ranged in age from 16 to 63 years old. Probationary students ranged from 17 to 63 and those

interviewed ranged from 18 to 29. All undergraduate students, probationary students, and

interviewed students had a mean age of 21, 22, and 21 respectively. The undergraduate student body was 90% Caucasian and 10% racial or ethnic minorities. Of all probationary students, 82% were Caucasian and 16% were racial or ethnic minorities. Of the 20 students interviewed, 19 (95%) were Caucasian and one student (5%) was a racial or ethnic minority. Pell grant eligible students made up 29% of the general undergraduate student body, 35% of all probationary students, and 30% of those interviewed.

Measures of ability such as ACT (a college preparedness exam) scores and high school percentile ranking were not available for all students. However, of those that were available all undergrad students, students on probation, and students interviewed had a high school percentile range of 1-99, 1-97, and 26-92 respectively. ACT composite scores, again from those available, ranged from 12 to 35 for all undergraduate students, from 12-33 for all probationary students, and from 15-31 for those interviewed. A breakdown of other ACT scores for each group is available in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information for: 1) All Undergrad, 2) All Students on Probation, and 3) Probationary Students Interviewed.

	Undergraduate Student Body	Undergraduate Probationary Students	Probationary Students Interviewed
Total	8,635	683	20
Male	48%	65%	65%
Female	52%	35%	35%
Age Range	16-63	17-63	18-29
Age Mean	21	22	21
Caucasian	90%	82%	95%
Minority	10%	18%	5%
Pell Grant Eligible	29%	35%	30%
High School Percentile Range (of those available)	1-99	1-97	26-92
ACT Composite Score Range	12-35	12-33	15-31
ACT Math Score Range	11-36	14-33	14-32
ACT English Score Range	8-36	8-34	13-30
ACT Reading Score Range	9-36	10-35	12-30
ACT Science Score Range	10-36	13-36	17-32

Procedure

Gaining access. The Office of Registration and Records provided the names of every undergraduate student at UWSP, their academic probation status, and data regarding several other demographic variables. Students were placed on probation due to their lack of achieving a 2.0 GPA during the semester immediately preceding this study-fall 2009. Recruitment e-mails were sent to every probationary student inviting them to be interviewed for a study. They were told that the purpose of the study was to understand student experiences at UWSP and improve the academic probation system in order to help students reach their academic goals.

Although it was likely that students may be reluctant to discuss their probationary status, interviews were chosen over other methods such as surveys because interviews would likely result in a deeper understanding of student experiences since follow-up questions could easily be employed. Incentives for participation included free weekly tutoring for the remainder of the semester, a free lunch at the University Dining Services, and a chance to win a $20 gift certificate to the university's bookstore.

As students responded to the e-mail invitation, a time was arranged to meet for an interview. A total of 40 students responded to the invitation and the first 20 students that could be scheduled were interviewed in the campus Tutoring-Learning Center (the researcher's department). Informed consent was discussed in detail at the beginning of the interview, with an emphasis on confidentiality. Participants were then asked to sign a consent form. All participants were asked for permission to audiotape the interview for review purposes and for obtaining rich quotes and all agreed.

Data sources. Respondents were first asked questions which set a conversational tone and helped to put them at ease. These initial questions helped to understand the individual characteristics of the students and their commitment to UWSP and to obtaining a degree. Initial questions included: what is your major, how many semesters have you completed at UWSP, do you live on or off campus, did you transfer or are you considering transferring, are you a first-generation college student, and how did you choose UWSP.

After this cursory examination, further open-ended questions explored the main areas of interest to this study (See Appendix). Follow-up questions were also asked to gain a deeper understanding when necessary. These questions helped further understanding of the experiences of students on academic probation. Analysis of responses allowed the generation of theory which

resulted in the recommendation for interventions as well as organizational and communication changes that could subsequently improve student retention.

Data collection, analysis, and writing. SPSS was used to compare the demographics of the entire UWSP undergraduate student body to the students on academic probation. Chi-square was used to determine if there were statistical differences in the distribution between actual and expected numbers of students on probation within various demographic categories. Pair-wise comparisons were used to further analyze variables that had more than two categories.

Interviews were digitally recorded and the data is stored on the researcher's computer at UWSP. Notes were taken during the interviews and are stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. Analysis of interviews included thorough engagement with the data including reading, sorting, coding, and constant comparison of the data and category groupings. More specifically, as characteristic of grounded theory, analysis involved (1) open coding which allow categories to evolve from the data, (2) axial coding where core concepts are identified, and (3) selective coding of identifying a central theme and generating theory (Creswell, 2007).

During the open coding process the words, phrases, and sentences of the respondents were analyzed in order to identify their meaning and designate categories. Language of the respondents guided the development of code and category labels. This in vivo coding of the students' experiences was compared and contrasted to produce complex and inclusive categories. The researcher kept self-reflective memos to document and track the progression of the analysis process. Memos included questions regarding, thoughts about, or reactions to the data or emerging theory. A journal of these memos was used to cross-reference codes and categories.

During axial coding the data was put back together in order to make connections and to identify the core concepts surrounding students on academic probation. Selective coding allowed

the researcher to identify a central theme regarding college students' probationary experiences. This process related that central theme to other categories and validated the relationships. Codes and categories were sorted, compared, and contrasted until all the data was analyzed and no new codes or categories emerged. A number of factors were involved in the identification of a central theme. The central theme was pivotal in relation to other categories. It appeared most frequently in the data compared to other categories. Additionally, it lends itself to a more generalized theory.

While the retention of college students has been an important topic for some time, President Obama's recent spotlight on education is yet another incentive to concentrate on this issue. Each university is being called upon to help increase the number of Americans who hold a college degree. Therefore, all options to increase the number of graduates should be explored. While recruitment of students to higher education is important, it only makes sense to support those who already have some level of commitment to obtaining a degree.

Chapter Three: Results

UWSP does not currently have a coordinated retention program or initiative, nor does it have a program specifically for students on probation. Therefore, this study helped to describe the characteristics of the population of students on probation and how these students are navigating their educational and probationary experiences. It also helped to identify current organizational and communication practices that are helping students to succeed and where there are opportunities for growth and improvement.

UWSP seeks to improve its current retention rate and contribute to the effort to increase the nation's degree-holding population. This study is one small step to analyzing a population at risk of academic failure and identifying how the institution can communicate with students on probation to help them persist in college and to graduate. Finally, this study contributes to the wealth of research regarding students on academic probation and student retention.

A demographic investigation provided insight into a profile of students who have experienced academic difficulty at UWSP. Multiple characteristics were examined including gender, age, race, socio-economic status, first-generation college student status, high school percentile ranking, ACT scores, classification, semesters completed, original enrollment status, and residence hall occupancy. Interviews of 20 students on academic probation provided further insight into student characteristics, as well as student experiences and challenges at UWSP which may contribute to academic difficulty and lack of success.

Several themes emerged from the interviews. The most prominent theme was lack academic success strategies, or generally being underprepared for the rigors of university-level work. This encompassed several aspects that are discussed below in more detail. Secondary themes included lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences, institutional and

instructional challenges, reluctance to seek help, and lack knowledge or use of support services. Other more minor themes included interference from diagnosed or suspected disabilities, financial challenges, family or social challenges, and long-term absences. Most of the students interviewed were experiencing multiple themes/challenges at once, which served to further compound their difficulties. Finally, several students had powerful reactions to being placed on probation. Each theme is described in more detail along with student quotes following the demographic examination.

Demographic Examination

Identifying the characteristics of students who are experiencing academic difficulty at UWSP was important in order to determine whether there were any discernable differences between them and the general student body. Therefore, a demographic analysis was performed comparing the entire UWSP undergraduate student body to that of the students on academic probation. This comparison revealed which student characteristics were overrepresented in the probationary population. While UWSP has graduate students, they were omitted from the data set. All references to the student body and students on probation refer to undergraduates only.

The Office of Registration and Records and the Office of Financial Aid provided data about students from fall semester of 2009. The data was analyzed and compared using chi-square and pair-wise comparisons in SPSS. Out of 8,635 undergraduate students at UWSP, 683 earned less than a 2.0 GPA and were placed on some type of academic probation or were suspended. This amounted 8% of the student body.

There are different types of probation at UWSP. Probation-1 means that either the student's semester GPA or cumulative GPA (or both) are less than 2.0. A total of 478 (70%) of the probationary students were on probation-1. Probation-2 means that either the student's

semester or cumulative GPA is less than 2.00 AND they are already on Probation-1. This is a

final warning that the student needs to raise both their semester and cumulative GPAs to a 2.00

or higher at the end of their next semester of attendance. A total of 77 (11%) of probationary

students were placed on probation-2. In addition, 47 (7%) probationary students were suspended

and readmitted on probation. One student was suspended and approved for select registration.

One student was suspended with academic bankruptcy. A total of 79 (12%) were suspended.

Table 2 shows the f the student distribution among the various types of academic probation and

suspension.

Table 2

Distribution of Students among Types of Probation and Suspension

Type of Probation	Count	Percent
Probation-1	478	70%
Probation-2	77	11%
Suspended-Readmit on Probation	47	7%
Suspended-Approve Select Registration	1	0%
Suspended-Bankruptcy	1	0%
Suspended	79	12%
Total	683	100%

The student characteristic of gender was analyzed and compared. Results are displayed in

Table 3. There was a gender difference in students experiencing academic difficulty at UWSP.

Males made up only 48% of the student body, and they made up 65% of the students on

academic probation. Males were significantly overrepresented as being on probation, $\chi^2(1, N =$

$8635) = 89.92$, $p = .000$.

Age was also analyzed and the results are in Table 3. Most students at UWSP are

traditional-age. Students under the age of 24 account for 87% of the student body and make up

83% of those on probation. Non-traditional students (over age 24) make up 13% of the student

body and make up 17% of those on probation. Non-traditional students were significantly

overrepresented as being on probation, $\chi^2(1, N = 8635) = 10.05$, $p = .002$.

Age is not the only variable that determines whether a student is non-traditional. Veterans

are also considered non-traditional students regardless of their age. Currently veterans number

only 269 or 3.1% of the student body, but are a growing population at UWSP. Veterans make up

4.5% of the students on probation. This is slightly higher than the general student body, as 11%

of veteran students were on probation, compared to only 8% of the overall student body.

Race and ethnicity were analyzed as a potential indicator of academic difficulty. While

90% of UWSP students were Caucasian, they made up only 82% of the students on probation.

Racial and ethnic minority groups were overrepresented as being on probation. Minority students

made up 8% of the student body and 16% of those on probation. Chi-square confirmed that

students of color were more likely to be on probation than white students. This was true of both

American students of color, $\chi^2(1, N = 8329) = 54.24$, $p = .000$ and also true of international

students of color, $\chi^2(1, N = 7952) = 6.81$, $p = .009$. There was not a significant difference in the

rate of academic probation between international and American students of color $\chi^2(1, N = 723)$

$= .86$, $p = .354$. The race/ethnicity of 2% of the student body was unknown and therefore was not

included these analyses.

Table 3

Gender, Age, and Race/Ethnicity of Student Body Compared to Students on Probation

Gender	Student Body Count	Student Body Percent	Probationary Students Count	Probationary Students Percent	% of Cohort on Probation	Sig.
Females	4,517	52%	238	35%	5.3%	***
Males	4,118	48%	445	65%	10.8%	
Age						
Under Age 24	7,524	87%	568	83%	7.5%	**
Age 24 or Older	1,111	13%	115	17%	10.4%	
Race/Ethnicity						
White (A)	7,779	90%	560	82%	7.2%	** (B) *** (C)
International Students of Color (B)	173	2%	22	3%	12.7%	** (A)
American Students of Color (C)	550	6%	88	13%	16.0%	*** (A)
Unknown	133	2%	13	2%	9.8%	-

Note: Unknown groups were not included in comparisons.
** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Two measures of ability were also analyzed for significant differences between expected and observed rates of students being on probation. These measures were ACT scores which are shown in Table 4 and high school percentile ranking which are in Table 5. ACT scores were not available for 20% of the student body and those students were not included in comparisons. The ACT score range was comparable for both the overall student body and for students on probation. The average composite ACT score at UWSP was 23. Therefore, scores of 22-23 were used as a midpoint to divide students into cohorts of comparable sizes. Students with lower ACT composite scores were overrepresented in the probationary population, more so than students who scored at higher levels.

Students with ACT composite scores of ≤19 were significantly overrepresented on probation compared to the three highest-scoring cohorts. A chi-square pair-wise comparison of the ≤19 cohort to the 22-23 cohort was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 2700) = 8.16$, $p = .004$. A chi-square pair-wise comparison of the ≤19 cohort to the 24-25 cohort was also significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 2351) = 11.78$, $p = .001$. Additionally, a chi-square pair-wise comparison of the ≤19 cohort to the ≥26 cohort was the most significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 2460) = 15.55$, $p = .000$. Students with ACT composite scores of 20-21 were significantly overrepresented on probation compared to the two highest-scoring cohorts.

An inverse relationship existed between composite ACT score and probationary status. Percentage of students on probation increased as ACT scores decreased. As Table 4 shows, only 5.5% of students whose composite ACT score was ≥26 were on probation. Percent of students on probation steadily increased as ACT scores decreased with 9.8% of students scoring ≤ 19 being on probation. Interestingly, the largest percentage of students on probation appeared in the cohort those whose ACT scores were unknown. ACT scores were unknown for 1,760 students, 80% of whom were transfer students.

Table 4

ACT Scores of Student Body Compared to Students on Probation

ACT Score Range	Student Body	Probationary Students
ACT Comp Range	12-35	12-33
ACT Math Range	11-36	14-33
ACT English Range	8-36	8-34
ACT Reading Range	9-36	10-35
ACT Science Range	10-36	13-36

ACT Scores	Student Body		Probationary Students		% of Cohort on Probation	Sig.
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
$\geq$ 26 (A)	1,358	16%	75	11%	5.5%	** (D) *** (E)
24-25 (B)	1,249	15%	74	11%	5.9%	* (D) ** (E)
22-23 (C)	1,598	19%	107	16%	6.7%	** (E)
20-21 (D)	1,568	18%	132	19%	8.4%	** (A) * (B)
$\leq$ 19 (E)	1,102	13%	108	16%	9.8%	*** (A) ** (B) ** (C)
Unknown	1,760	20%	187	27%	10.6%	-

** p < .01 *** p < .001

High school percentile rank was examined as a second indicator of academic ability. The

range of high school percentile rankings was comparable for probationary and non-probationary

students. High school rank was unavailable for 12% of the student body and was therefore not

included in chi-square calculations. The remaining students were divided into three cohorts for

comparison. Students ranking at or below the 49th percentile in high school accounted for 14% of

the general student body, but 26% of those on probation. Students ranking in this lowest cohort

were significantly overrepresented on probation compared to the two higher cohorts. Cohorts

statistically significant from the ≤49 cohort included students with high school percentile

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rankings of 50-74, $\chi^2(1, N = 4424) = 30.24$, $p = .000$. The $\leq 49^{th}$ cohort also differed significantly

from the C cohort, $\chi^2(1, N = 4353) = 207.83$, $p = .000$. The 50-74 percentile ranking was also

overrepresented on probation compared to the ≤ 75 percentile cohort, $\chi^2(1, N = 6405) = 103.78$, p

$= .000$ Results of high school percentile ranking calculations are noted in Table 5. There was an

inverse relationship between high school percentile ranking and percentage of students on

probation. As high school percentile ranking increased, the percentage of students on probation

within that cohort decreased.

Table 5

High School Percentile of Student Body Compared to Students on Probation

	Student Body		Probationary Students			
HS Percentile Range	1-99		1-97			
High School Percentile	Student Body		Probationary Students		% of Cohort on Probation	Sig.
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
≥ 75 (A)	3,167	37%	96	14%	3.0%	*** (B) *** (C)
50-74 (B)	3,238	38%	297	44%	9.2%	*** (A) *** (C)
$\leq 49\%$ (C)	1,186	14%	178	26%	15.0%	*** (A) *** (B)
Unknown	1,044	12%	112	16%	10.7%	-

Due to rounding student body percent column totals 101%.
*** $p < .001$

Students with low socioeconomic status and first-generation college students often

struggle in college. These variables were analyzed and are presented in Table 6. A total of 29%

of the student body was eligible for a federal Pell grant in fall 2009 and 35% of Pell-eligible

students were on academic probation. Being eligible for a Pell grant was a significant indicator

of being on probation compared to those who were not eligible for a Pell grant, $\chi^2(1, N = 8635) =$

13.44, $p = .000$.

UWSP has only recently begun collecting information on first-generation college student status. Therefore, first-generation status was unknown for 70% of the student body. A total of 15% of the student body was known to be first-generation college students. However, 22% of those on probation were first-generation college students. First-generation college student status was found to be an indicator of academic probation, although less so than other demographic variables, $\chi^2(1, N = 2565) = 3.86, p = .049$.

Table 6

Pell Grant Eligible and First-Generation College Students Status of Student Body Compared to Students on Probation

	Student Body		Probationary Students		% of Cohort on Probation	Sig.
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
Not Pell Eligible	6,158	71%	445	65%	7.2%	***
Pell Grant Eligible	2,477	29%	238	35%	9.6%	
Not First-Generation	1,239	14%	111	16%	9.0%	*
First-Generation	1,326	15%	151	22%	11.4%	
Unknown	6,070	70%	421	62%	6.9%	-

Note. Unknown groups were not included in comparisons.
Due to rounding first-generation student body percent column totals 101%.
* $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

Retention rates are determined between a student's first and second year at an institution. Therefore, it was important to look at student classification status and semesters completed. Over 150 students at each classification were on probation. Chi-square calculations revealed that freshmen, sophomores, and juniors were overrepresented compared to seniors but not to each other. Students ranking as freshmen had the greatest number (185) and percentage (27%) of their cohort on probation, although sophomores and juniors had very similar numbers and percentages of students on probation. Results are noted in Table 7.

Table 7

Student Classification of Student Body Compared to Students on Probation

Classification	Student Body		Probationary Students		% of Cohort on Probation	Sig.
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
Freshman (A)	1,675	19%	185	27%	11.0%	*** (D)
Sophomore (B)	1,681	20%	175	26%	10.4%	*** (D)
Junior (C)	1,840	21%	169	25%	9.2%	*** (D)
Senior (D)	3,439	40%	154	23%	4.5%	*** (A,B,C)

*** $p < .001$

Classification alone does not reveal everything about retaining a student between their first and second year. Classification is determined by the number of credits accumulated, not actual time at an institution. Classification also does not reflect new first-time, full-time status which is the standard measure used by the federal government in examining retention. Semesters at an institution also need to be considered. The data provided by the Office of Registration and Records noted how many semesters each student had attended UWSP. However, the data provided included summer and winter terms, as well as in-progress semesters. Because these non-standard terms were also included, it was difficult to determine where students truly were in their academic career. For example, a spot check revealed the following scenario. A student was listed as a freshman, but also as having completed three terms. Three successful terms would typically place a student as sophomore status. This student had taken courses during a spring semester, then a summer and a fall term. She was unsuccessful and suspended. Therefore, looking at these variables in isolation does not necessarily reveal a complete picture and the scope of this study did not permit a deeper analysis.

Students were divided into three cohorts for comparison. Students who had completed three or fewer semesters made up 30% of the student body, yet 41% of the students on probation.

The 0-3 term cohort was significantly overrepresented on probation compared to the 4-6 term cohort, $\chi^2(1, N = 5318) = 17.90$, $p = .000$ and the 7-25 term cohort $\chi^2(1, N = 5913) = 41.03$, $p = .000$. Details are provided in Table 8.

Table 8

Semesters Completed at UWSP Student Body Compared to Students on Probation (includes in-progress semesters, summer sessions, and winterim terms)

Terms Completed	Student Body		Probationary Students		% of Cohort on Probation	Sig.
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
0-3 Terms (A)	2,596	30%	279	41%	10.7%	*** (B) *** (C)
4-6 Terms (B)	2,722	32%	201	29%	7.4%	*** (A)
≥7 Terms (C)	3,317	38%	203	30%	6.1%	*** (A)

*** $p < .001$

Original enrollment status was another variable examined and is shown in Table 9. Students with an original enrollment status of "new" accounted for 73% of the student body and only 67% of those on probation. Transfer students made up 27% of the student body and 33% of the students on probation. Transfer students were overrepresented in the probationary population and this was found to be statistically significant compared to new students $\chi^2(1, N = 8632) = 16.66$, $p = .000$.

Table 9

Original Enrollment Status of Student Body Compared to Students on Probation

Original Enrollment Status	Student Body		Probationary Students		% of Cohort on Probation	Sig.
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
New	6,329	73%	455	67%	7.2%	***
Transfer	2,303	27%	228	33%	9.9%	
Re-Entry	3	0%	0	0%	-	-

Note. Re-Entry category was not included in comparisons.
*** $p < .001$

Taking a closer look at characteristics of the transfer student population only, it was discovered that 10% of all transfer students were on probation or suspended. Additionally, 90% of transfer students were upperclassmen, ranking as juniors or seniors. A total of 96% (n=2,204) had declared a major at the time of the study. Eighty-seven percent (n=1,995) lived off campus and only 14% (n=308) of transfer students lived in the residence halls.

UWSP has an active residential living program that strives to support students socially and academically. Residence hall directors follow up with their residents who are on probation and offer support, guidance, and refer them to appropriate resources as needed. It was important to see what percentage of the probationary population residential living support may be reaching. Therefore, residence hall occupancy was also analyzed and presented in Table 10.

Only 36% percent of the student body lived in a residence hall and they made up 34% of the students on probation. That left 64% of the student body living off campus and accounting for 66% of the students on probation. Living on or off campus was not found to be a significant indicator of being on academic probation $\chi^2(1, N = 8635) = .37, p = .542$. However, it does mean that two-thirds of the students on probation (nearly 450 students) do not have the benefit of a residence hall director supporting them. While no significance was found, the large numbers of students living off campus and being on probation encouraged a closer analysis of this population.

Table 10

Residence Hall Occupancy of Student Body Compared to Students on Probation

Residence Halls	Student Body		Probationary Students		% of Cohort on Prob.	Sig.
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
Living in Residence Hall	3,070	36%	235	34%	7.7%	NS
Living Off Campus	5,565	64%	448	66%	8.1%	

Note. NS = Not statistically significant.

The University of Wisconsin System has a policy that requires students to live in a residence hall until they have completed four semesters. Exceptions are made for students who live with their parents (within a 40-mile radius of the university), are married, are a veteran, or have been out of high school two or more years. The data showed that UWSP students, like other college students, tend to struggle early in their college careers. UWSP has a higher retention rate among students who persist into their second year and beyond. It was important to determine how many students were not living in the residence halls, how many of them were early in their college career, and if they were experiencing difficulty.

It was found that 5,565 students did not live in the residence halls. Students who had completed two or fewer semesters at UWSP (freshmen and transfer students) and did not live in the residence halls numbered 639 and 89 (14%) were on probation or suspended. Students ranking as freshmen who did not live in the residence halls numbered 290 and 67 (23%) were on probation or suspended.

The demographic analysis identified which student characteristics were the most overrepresented on probation. However, the interviews identified what particular challenges students on probation faced and how they were navigating their probationary semester.

Interview Themes

Twenty students on academic probation were interviewed about their thoughts and experiences surrounding their academic probation at UWSP. The goal was to understand how these students were making sense of their experiences. The students interviewed represented a wide spectrum of individuals. At one end of the spectrum were traditional-age college students who had just graduated from high school. At the other end, non-traditional students returning

after several years away from school, including one student who had spent 44 months in prison. In the middle were transfer students who had complete two years at a community or technical college before transferring to UWSP.

Students had many experiences that contributed to their lack of academic success and their academic and social integration into the university. Themes that emerged from the interviews included: lacking academic success strategies or generally being underprepared for the rigors of university-level work; lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences; institutional and instructional challenges; reluctance to seek help; limited use of and lack of awareness regarding support services. More minor themes included interference from diagnosed or suspected disabilities, financial challenges, family or social challenges, and long-term absences. Most of the students interviewed were experiencing multiple themes/challenges at once, which served to further compound their difficulties. Finally, several students had powerful reactions to being placed on probation. The themes are identified and described in Table 12.

Each theme is described below in more detail, along with student stories and quotes that demonstrate the theme. Words within student quotes are italicized to note when students placed emphasis on them. All students interviewed were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Table 12

Themes from Student Interviews

Themes and Description

Under-Preparedness/Lack of Academic Success Strategies

- Underdeveloped study skills and habits, especially independent learning skills
- Underestimating the level of detail, difficulty, depth, or extent of knowledge required to succeed
- Underestimating time necessary to devote to studying outside of class to be successful
- Inappropriate time management
- Lack of motivation
- Prioritizing other activities over academics

Lack of Meaningful Advising and Mentoring Experiences

- Lack of approachability and connection to faculty advisors and professors
- Apprehensive to visit advisor after failing advisor's class
- Faculty advisors did not take time to get to know student
- Advising appointment consisted of schedule-checking (Lacking guidance, direction, and depth)
- Students desired more meaningful, personalized, one-on-one interactions with faculty advisors
- Faculty advisors lacked availability, follow through with advising requests
- Difficulty navigating different advising systems (peer, staff, faculty advisors)

Institutional and Instructional Challenges

- Lack of seat availability
- Courses perceived as irrelevant to future education or career goals
- Simultaneous enrollment in two or more historically-difficult courses
- Taking courses long after placement exam
- Few evaluations/lack of feedback before drop date
- Mismatch of course delivery or evaluation methods to student learning style and strengths
- Challenges with online courses

Reluctance to Seek Help

- Large class sizes intimidating
- Intimidated by professors
- Fear of being judged
- Sociocultural value of independence

Themes and description

Knowledge and Use of Support Services

- Unaware of services
- Unfamiliar with extent of services
- Presumption about how services were delivered

Interference from Disabilities

- Diagnosed disabilities - not taking medication
- Diagnosed disabilities - not registered with Disability Services, no accommodations
- Undiagnosed and untreated disabilities (mainly ADD/ADHD)

Financial Challenges

- Balancing the demands of work and school
- Drugs - selling to earn money, taking due to money pressures
- Lack of knowledge about financial aid

Family and Personal Challenges

- Unhappy family life
- Parents divorcing
- Death in family
- Legal issues/Jail
- Lack of connection to a social group

Extended Absences

- Illness
- Jail
- Understanding professors, but lacked time and tools to complete required work

Web of Compounding Challenges

- Each student had distinctive characteristics and faced a unique web of multiple challenges

Reaction to Being on Probation

- Traumatic, shameful, fearful, embarrassed, devastated, shocked, scared
- Depression

Under-preparedness and Lack of Academic Success Strategies

Academic dismissal is one means by which students leave college, although it is not the most common reason. Usually students leave college before being dismissed when they are having difficulty. Tinto (1993) notes that students must have the intellectual capacity for college, have the study skills and habits necessary to do well, and also apply those skills and habits. The central theme that emerged from the interviews was that many students were under-prepared and lacked the academic success strategies to do well in university-level academics.

Regardless of their previous educational success, many students were under-prepared and had difficulty adapting to what was required of them to flourish in their courses at UWSP. This theme encompassed several aspects including underdeveloped study skills and habits, especially a lack of independent learning skills; underestimating the level of detail, difficulty, depth, or extent of knowledge required to succeed; underestimating the time necessary to devote to studying outside of class to be successful, inappropriate time management; lack of motivation; and prioritizing other activities over academics. One or more aspects of being under-prepared for college-level academics or lacking academic success strategies was mentioned in 17 of the 20 interviews, thereby being the most common theme.

Students expressed that their prior educational experiences had not ingrained in them sufficient study habits or study skills for what was needed to do well at a UWSP. Most expressed that they had achieved average or higher grades in high school and/or community college with little effort and that this same effort at UWSP was not resulting in the same achievement.

Lack of study habits were prominent and independent learning was a new skill that many students were inexperienced with. Greg, who had taken AP classes in high school and graduated with a 3.7 GPA, expressed this idea well:

There was so much more class time in high school, I could just learn it all in class

and not have to study much outside the class. I guess that's where the transition

here to college has been a huge struggle for me, is the amount of time you study

outside the class. It's like, freshmen year I felt like I had to learn how to study

outside the classroom. It's the most challenging thing about college, academically.

Nancy, an average student in high school, thought her lack of study habits and skills did

not have an impact until her sophomore year. As a freshman, she mostly had courses that

required her to write papers, which she felt came more easily to her. During her

sophomore year she enrolled in several science courses where she was evaluated mostly

by exams rather than papers. She said, "I didn't get the whole studying thing and, you

know, in high school I never had to study either. . . . [My sophomore year] was kind of

like my first semester of studying." Nancy had earned a 2.5 and 2.8 GPA in her first two

semesters at UWSP, then a 1.65 GPA as a first-semester sophomore. As a Forestry major,

she would be required to take many more courses that would involve significant study

time and effort. Nancy was aware of her lack of academic success strategies and desired

to improve:

I definitely study a lot more often now [after being placed on probation], and I've

been trying to figure out—'cause I am not like—like a reader. And in college you

have to read a lot. I've been trying to read a lot more and really get into it. . . . It's

working a lot better, but there is still room for improvement. Right now my grades

are Bs and Cs. But Bs would be awesome.

Nancy had started attending tutoring sessions during the semester in which she was

interviewed in order to help her improve her study skills and study habits.

Fran also reported not having to study much outside of high school classes to earn

Bs. She too lacked sufficient study skills and habits:

> I didn't study a lot in high school. I am still looking for good study habits. I don't
>
> know very many good ones. I see people making flash cards and I've never made
>
> any. So I should probably try that skill and see how that works for me.

Fran had increased her study time after being placed on probation, but was still lacking

specific strategies which might make her efforts more effective.

Having attended a community or technical college did not make the transition to a

university any easier for the students interviewed. Eric had graduated from high school with a

3.4 GPA and had completed two years at a technical college. He found the workload at UWSP

far exceed anything expected of him before:

> I didn't have to study at all in high school. At my tech school I could study once
>
> or twice outside of class and be fine. But you've got *so* much homework here
>
> every night. Reading. And then you got more. You just got to keep studying
>
> basically. Growing up, going from high school to a tech school then all of a
>
> sudden jumping to a university . . . maybe tech school didn't prepare me as well.
>
> It's an over-all struggle for me.

Robert reported earning As and Bs in high school and also attended a community college before

transferring to UWSP. He also felt that his community college experience had not prepared him

for the workload he experienced in his university courses:

> [UWSP is] a harder school. Like, [my community college] was easy. I didn't have
>
> to study. I didn't have to do nothing. You could procrastinate all day long and still
>
> get As. You know. High school, same thing. Never really had to study nothing. So

that transition from high school to [community] college I thought was going to be

harder and it wasn't. Then I come down here [to UWSP] and it was totally

different. You have to study and you have to work and I just didn't catch on to

that right away. And next thing you know, you're failing and your grades are

doing horrible. It just—it took me a *long* time. Even [my second semester] I still

kind of struggled. And then it's just—I think I still almost have a hard grasp of—

5-credit classes are—I hate them. You know, I struggle at them so bad because

the workload is so hard.

Robert's lack of success was a surprise and a difficult battle throughout his time at UWSP. He

was a senior at the time of his interview and had earned a 1.77 GPA the previous semester,

having earned two Ds in courses within his major.

Tom achieved average grades in high school, graduating with a 2.8 GPA. He found

greater success in his first semester at a community college, but admitted that his grades

"slipped" after that first semester. However, he did complete two years, before transferring to

UWSP. Tom said,

Last semester . . . was the toughest semester I ever had. Changing from a

community college to a 4-year program, it was a lot different and a lot harder. The

classes here are a lot bigger than they were at [my community college]. I also

thought the classes were a lot more demanding and time consuming, especially

when it came to studying and reading the textbooks and stuff. 'Cause at [my

community college], I never read. I never read my textbooks. I knew I was going

to have to work a lot harder than at [my community college].

Tom was definitely overwhelmed by effort needed to be successful in his coursework. He

had decided to join the military and was not returning to UWSP the following semester.

Many other students interviewed described underdeveloped study skills and habits.

Independent learning was a significant challenge. Nearly all participants reported that the

amount of independent learning necessary to do well was a surprise and many did not

easily adjust.

The level of detail and difficulty of course material, along with the depth and extent of

knowledge required to do well was also a new challenge. Prior educational experiences only

required knowledge of general concepts. Being required to know or figure out in-depth details

independently was a new and difficult challenge. John, a high achiever in high school having

earned a 3.7 GPA, expressed this idea well:

Tests are harder. The questions are a lot more specific. When you are studying

your notes you have to look at all the fine details, like the small numbers and

calculations that were produced and certain things. In high school, questions were

more in general. [At UWSP] there are a lot of things you have to do outside of

lectures like taking your notes and actually going on the internet and analyzing

certain things, like looking up why this happens and for what reasons. But in high

school they go over that in class so you wouldn't really have to figure that stuff

out on your own.

Robert felt he understood general concepts, but struggled to demonstrate a depth of

understanding:

That was a tough class. She was a good teacher. It was just a lot of overwhelming

information . . . It was right out of the textbook kind of stuff. But it was like a

really hard class. I knew what she was talking about, but putting it down on paper was a foreign language to me like how to write the genes out. It was really tough. But she was a good teacher. She knew her stuff. It was just tough for me to grasp. Robert was quite expressive and often sounded overwhelmed by the difficulty level of the courses he had struggled in.

Hayden had achieved As, Bs, and Cs in high school and mostly Bs and Cs in community college without studying outside of class. He also did not expect the level of difficulty he was faced with:

> I feel like there are a lot of transfer students who are here just ready and rockin' to go. . . . I just didn't realize it was going to be difficult. I was jumping from 100-level classes to 300-level classes. So all of sudden it just came by and kicked my ass. All of [my classes]. I didn't anticipate doing this poorly.

Hayden thought the difficulty level at UWSP was beyond what he was accustomed to in community college. He was struggling, having earned a 1.48 GPA in his first semester at UWSP.

Students who struggled with independent learning often reported that they desired more direction and support. Ben was an average student in high school earning mostly Cs, but struggled with anxiety. He had received training on study skills in the past and was confident in his test-taking strategies. However, he too struggled with independent learning:

> A good chunk of my classes offer no review and I've got a vast sea of topics to go over . . . So I have to be— sink or swim with some of these topics . . . So I would like to have a better eye for things that are necessary in a test.

Ben was overwhelmed by the amount of course material on exams and desired more guidance such as test reviews and study guides. Tom also was surprised at the workload saying, "There is so much information you have to retain from the notes for the tests." Tom had starting using tutors to help him manage his studies.

While most of the students interviewed struggled with science courses, Andy also underestimated the level of detail required to be successful in some humanities courses. For example, he said, "[The professor] gets very detailed. He looks for very particular responses and if you don't get that very particular response, you don't do very well on exams."

Crystal earned Bs and Cs in high school. She was a self-described "border-line student." Her lack of success in college made her question her abilities. She said, "I don't think I am ready [for college]. I think I went to college because that is what you do after high school and I didn't know what else I would do." She had already planned not to return to UWSP the following semester.

The theme of lacking academic success strategies and being underprepared for university-level work was demonstrated by students taking humanities courses as well as science courses. Students often used terms such as "difficult," "hard," and "tough" to describe their courses and "overwhelmed" to describe their feelings about the material. Prior educational experiences had not instilled in these students effective study habits or skills to be successful at a university. The level of detail students needed to understand, the amount of material they were expected to learn, and that they were expected to learn much of it independently was a new and demanding undertaking.

The lack of academic success strategy theme encompassed additional facets as well including difficulty with time management, difficulty with motivation, and prioritizing other activities over studying.

Crystal described how she underestimated the time she needed to do well in her courses:

I am not a very fast reader. I have never been much of a reader. . . . If I read something I have to like, write —and maybe that is why I don't study as much because it's such a process. It takes a long time. I see my roommate . . . we had our English class together last semester . . . we would put in the same amount of work and she would get As and Bs and I would get Cs and Ds. It sucks. It's discouraging.

Comparing herself to others, Crystal had to exert more effort in order to do well which affected her motivation. Crystal went on to express that had a difficult time staying organized and managing her time:

My problem wasn't with day-to-day homework stuff, but more long-term stuff like papers . . . due dates way off and then all of sudden it's like, oh no, that has to be due tomorrow . . . Usually when I get an assignment, I get excited about it and start working on it. But then other stuff gets in the way and I forget about it until more last minute-ish. I do a lot of things last minute actually . . . I had a day planner [last semester], but I didn't use it much. I am using it more this semester.

Andy also expressed lack of time management and motivation:

It was a major screw-up on my part. I didn't start working on the paper early enough. I knew I didn't have enough time to do a passing-grade paper. . . . I am

one who procrastinates. I had the materials gathered, but then had other papers

due for other classes. I would have had to be up for three days straight to finish.

Lack of time management and motivation was an on-going problem for Andy. He admitted to

getting distracted when he studied at his desk because it was "too easy to check Facebook."

In addition to his lack of study skills and habits, Robert had difficulty motivating himself

for courses he had little interest in:

It's tough to get into that grind mode and just actually sit down and do it. That is

the hardest part I think. 'Cause the minute you go—like I did, coming from an

easy college and then you know every class I was taking up there [in community

college], I liked. Then I come down here [to UWSP] and I had to take all the

generals and I did not like them at all. I mean I was just—It's hard to keep your

mind into that you know.

Robert said this last comment somewhat laughing at himself. However, he had struggled

in many courses (both within is major and general degree requirements), receiving Ds, Fs,

or Ws in 13 courses at UWSP.

Tom was perhaps the most unmotivated student interviewed. Like others, he had

never studied much in high school or community college. Tom earned a 1.5 GPA in his

first semester at UWSP. He said,

The thing that makes it hard to like, get ready for a test or something or like—

Let's say I have like, something due. There's always something next that I have to

do. It's like—you don't get a break to like just relax and just gather your thoughts

and stuff. There's always a next thing and stuff. But, I guess that's school so I

don't know.

Tom exerted little energy towards coursework, admitting that Thursday through Sunday he did not study much at all. He instead kept himself busy with other interests and in this respect, he was not unique.

Prioritizing other activities over schoolwork was practiced by many of those interviewed. Working, maintaining a social life, and participating in extracurricular clubs and recreational activities were among some of the out of class interests students engaged in.

Fran was a traditional-age, first-generation college student living at home. Throughout high school, she had worked all weekend at the two businesses owned by her parents and had participated in four extracurricular activities during the week. She reported that she "never had to study much outside of classes to earn Bs." As a first-semester freshman at UWSP, she participated in fewer extracurricular activities. However, she increased her work hours to 30 per week while attempting 16 credits. She earned a 1.17 GPA during her first semester. In the following semester she reduced her work hours and the number of credits she attempted. She did better, earning a 2.71 GPA. However, this improvement was still not enough to raise her cumulative GPA above a 2.0.

Greg, who had earned the rank of Eagle Scout while in high school, said that "balancing a social life" at college was difficult. He was active in his residence hall government and attended many home sports games. Greg stated that during the semester in which he ended up on probation, he had got his "very first girlfriend" and "spent a lot of time with her." Greg felt he had let his romantic relationship consume more of his time than he should have, especially during a semester with a difficult course load.

Three students (Ivan, John, and David) confessed to spending more time playing video games than they spent studying outside of class. Ivan transferred to UWSP with a 2.6 GPA from

his community college. He had the lowest ACT scores of any student interviewed; with a composite score of 15 (an average score was 23). Ivan estimated that he spent one to two hours per day studying and two to three hours per day playing video games. John said he played video games one to two hours per day during the week and more on the weekends. David, a 20-year old student, had the highest ACT scores of all the students interviewed, achieving a composite score of 31. During his freshman year, the game *Halo 3* came out and he played it "*a lot*" with friends. They would "stay up sometimes for 24-hours straight by drinking energy drinks, taking No-Doz, and Adderall." David also admitted that he was "doing a lot of partying, drinking, and smoking [marijuana]" during his freshman year where he earned a 1.81 GPA in his first semester and was suspended after earning a 0.20 GPA his second semester. He was readmitted and said he now spends "less time" partying and playing video games. However, at the time of his interview, David reported spending over twenty hours per week participating in intramural sports, playing on as many as four teams each block (an intramural season). At least one of the teams he played on traveled to meets four or five weekends out of the semester. On those weekends the team left campus on Friday and returned Sunday evening. David said that no studying gets accomplished during those weekends. John also participated in three intramural sports each session. Some of his games began at 11:00 p.m. on Sundays and weeknights.

During Robert's freshman year, he did not prioritize studying, but rather spent time with friends, went fishing, and exercised. Recreational activities were prominent with Tom as well, who reported spending about three to four hours per week studying. He spent much of his out of class time with friends playing disk golf, watching movies, or playing video games. He also lifted weights or ran up to an hour per day.

Hayden and Ivan also prioritized student recreational clubs. Hayden said his lack of academic success was due to "laziness." He said, "I had a good time." (Hayden's "laziness" is discussed later in the section on disabilities.) Hayden had found a group of friends with whom he connected. He said he and his friends "where always out doing something together" and that they spent 4-5 hours per day "playing pen and paper role playing games." He had also spent considerable time and energy "navigating the bureaucracy of student government" when he became an officer of a new student recreational group and helped to develop a club constitution and charter. Interestingly, three of the students interviewed mentioned being part of this club which was purely recreational with no academic connection.

Crystal, who did not think she was ready for college, found her calling with a student political action group. She became very passionate about the group's work. So much so that she prioritized the group's mission and activities over her own study time and would even skip class:

> In high school, I didn't really get involved a lot and then I came to college and
> like—The opportunities were just there and I was just like, trying new things and
> got too involved and focused more on, like well [my student political action group]
> is the main thing that I am involved in and focused—helped too much probably
> on [the student political action group] and not enough on school. I have trouble
> focusing. . . . I don't know. I guess I am disciplined with things that I really care
> about and— not that I don't care about school, but just—that's why I say that I
> am not ready [for college] because it's not like my main priority right now. So I
> am not as focused on it.

At the time of her interview, Crystal was not planning to return the following semester. However, she was planning to work full-time for the very same political action group's statewide non-profit organization.

With the exception of Crystal, it was typical for the students to be as involved as they were in non-academic activities. Analyzing the situation as an outsider, it is easy to assert that these students were not prioritizing schoolwork enough. However, it is important to remember that these same students had never been required to develop independent study habits or skills. Because coursework was primarily a classroom activity in high school and community college, most of these students had spent considerable time socializing with friends, working, playing sports, or doing other extracurricular activities. Two were even Eagle Scouts. For these students, an active life outside of the classroom was life as usual.

Maintaining an active life outside of the classroom was common among many, although not all, of the students interviewed. Out of the 20 students interviewed, 17 underestimated the time necessary to do well, had inappropriate time management, lack of motivation, and/or prioritized other activities over school work. However, some probationary students interviewed were highly motivated and dedicated many hours to studying. Sara was a 28-year old returning adult student who excitedly described her motivation and commitment to earning a degree at UWSP:

> I love science. . . . I actually came here [to UWSP] on a field trip when I was in
> the seventh grade. My teacher chose five students out of the class who he thought
> would end up being science majors and I came here and I was like, 'Oh my god, I
> want to be here.' It was kind of like my dream and I came from a background
> where like nobody really went to college in my family. I don't know. For me it

was just a big deal and I was smart and I wanted to kind of follow in my uncle's

footsteps. He is a chemical engineer. So I was like, I want to do that too.

Sara had graduated in the top 25% of her high school class and had earned As and Bs in

community college just before transferring to UWSP. She knew that her "mathematical

aptitude was lacking" and, as a Physics major, that she would have to work hard to

overcome that challenge. During the semester in which she ended up on probation, she

was studying 10-15 hours a week outside of class just for the courses in which she was

having difficulty. Sara was prepared for many of the demands of university-level course

work, yet she too was on probation.

Lack of academic success strategies and lack of preparation for university-level

coursework was the primary challenge expressed by students interviewed. However,

many students had additional challenges beyond a lack of study skills and habits.

Lack of Meaningful Advising and Mentoring Experiences

Most departures from college are not because students are failing out. More often

departures are due to a failure to adjust to college life and the student feeling a sense of

incongruence between themselves and the institution (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, interactions with

faculty outside of the classroom that are warm, friendly, and supportive are recommended in

order to integrate the student into the academic and social community of the university.

Unfortunately, these types of interactions are sometimes lacking. The second most common

theme that emerged from the interviews was a lack of meaningful advising and mentoring

experiences. Thirteen of the 20 students interviewed felt that they did not have a good

relationship with their faculty advisor. Faculty advisors were often seen as unapproachable

schedule-checkers, who did not take enough time to get to know the student well enough to

effectively advise either during regular advising sessions or during probationary advising meetings. Students desired more one-on-one time with faculty advisors and more meaningful, personalized interactions. Students were concerned about meeting for a probationary status meeting when it was their advisor whose class they had failed or when they were advised by a peer advisor. In these instances, students often neglected to follow through with these meetings. Students felt particularly distant from advisors whom they had never taken a course with. Feeling unimportant and uncared for was further exacerbated when faculty advisors did not follow up with the students about probationary meetings or advising appointments in general.

When students are placed on academic probation, they receive a form e-mail from the Registration and Records Office. This e-mail informs the student about their probationary status and informs them that they "must" visit their advisor in the first week of the new semester. Advisors are also notified by the same automated system. Eight of the 20 students interviewed did not follow up with the instruction to visit their advisor. Three of those said they did not realize or recall that they were supposed to meet with their advisor about being on probation. The other five simply did not follow through. None of these eight students ever met with anybody about their probationary status and no university personnel had followed up with them.

Fran did not visit her faculty advisor when she received the probation notification e-mail because he was the advisor of one of the two courses she failed. She was too embarrassed and uncomfortable to face him. She shyly giggled as she described her thoughts:

I felt kind of like, awkward to go and like—you know like—'You failed me. I am sorry that I failed your class.' So I felt kind of—I don't know weird and awkward to go and talk to him about it. I wouldn't know what to say to him about failing

his class. I don't know. So I just didn't and switched my major. . . . I really liked

him as a professor. He's a really cool guy. I just didn't like the class.

While Fran enjoyed all of her professors, she did not feel close to any of them. She wished for a

closer relationship with her professors like she felt she had with her high school teachers, but

said that it was only her first year. She did continue with this idea that UWSP was somewhat

impersonal:

You get your mass e-mails. I feel like the only time you are talking to professors

is via e-mail or after class if they don't have something going on or whatever.

Otherwise you are always getting just the mass e-mails to the [subject] majors or

the [subject] minors. It just never seems like the professor or advisor is looking

out for just you, which is understandable because there is a bunch of students here.

But it's nice to know that there is someone to talk to and that your professors do

want to get to know you and help you out.

Fran was asked about whether she had any faculty or staff member who she felt comfortable

going to for advice or guidance. She had switched to being an undeclared major and said that her

new full-time staff advisor for undeclared majors was "very helpful" and that she would "be

comfortable going to her for anything."

Like Fran, Andy had a similar concern about failing a course taught by his faculty advisor.

He previously had a faculty advisor who he liked very much, but when she took a sabbatical he

was placed with another advisor. His last advising appointment with the new advisor had lasted

"perhaps 5 or 6 minutes." They did not discuss his failing the faculty advisor's class, nor the

other three courses in which he had earned two Cs and a D. Andy said, "I usually walk into my

advising appointment with classes picked out. [My faculty advisor] verifies that they all work

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and approves it. I probably spend about 5, 6, 7 minutes and I am out of there." The department did not automatically switch him back when his previous faculty advisor (who he liked very much) returned from sabbatical. When asked why he did not switch back himself he said, "You have to see the chair of the department and [my current advisor] is also the chair, so . . . kind of an awkward conversation. I only have one more semester so I will just stick it out." He was asked if he thought his current advisor would be willing to discuss course difficulties if he took the initiative to bring them up himself, rather than the advisor. He was not sure, but he was not willing to bring them up himself. When asked why, Andy said,

> Dr. [advisor/professor], on the first day of class, says 'You can address me by Dr.
> or Prof. [last name], I have spent [so many] years getting this degree and I find it
> disrespectful if you call me [first name]. I am not your friend. I am not your equal.'
> Students say [he/she] knows the material, but comes off as an [expletive]. And
> this is now your advisor and department chair.

Surprisingly, Andy did not seem angry or even frustrated when discussing this situation, but instead seemed disappointed. Lack of approachability and lack of connection to professors and advisors was mentioned by several students.

Even when students did follow up with the requirement to meet with an advisor regarding their probationary status, their experiences were not always rewarding. Students were asked whether their advisor gave them any advice during their meeting about being on probation. Matt said, "Not really. I didn't really ask." Sara, who had graduated in the 76th percentile in high school, described her probationary meeting with her advisor:

> I went to her and was like, I don't understand. I've always been an A-B student. I
> have never had a C until I got here. I had *never* got a D before. She basically

ended up thinking it had something to do with the transfer. Maybe like different

school, different expectations. She said a lot of what I was saying was consistent

with what a freshman would say. . . . When I went to her, I remember thinking

that it was kind of useless to talk to her, but it was required. I didn't really feel

like I walked out with any good suggestions on how to improve. I didn't feel like

anything got resolved.

Generally students reported that their advisor confirmed what the students thought they had

already figured out. For example, Sara and her advisor had both concluded, "taking those two

math classes together was a bad idea." Others concluded that a lighter course load was in order

or fewer hours working, but these were not new ideas to the students. Faculty advisors did not

question student's study skills or habits, did not offer any specific study strategies or advice, and

did not discuss the student's learning style, interests, or strengths. They also did not ask about

whether the students were facing other challenges such as financial challenges or family,

personal, or social issues. Future directions for the student were also not discussed, with a couple

of exceptions. Both Sara and Ivan (each juniors and transfer students in their first semester at

UWSP) had advisors who encouraged them to switch majors. This was discouraging to both of

them. Based on what was revealed in the interviews, at times it seemed as if nobody was taking

control of these advising sessions, as if neither party really knew what to do, or as if the sessions

lacked true meaningful interaction and depth.

Many of the students interviewed found advising appointments in general lacked depth.

Karen had graduated in the 92nd percentile in high school and had earned a scholarship to attend

college. She had recently transferred to UWSP and felt like she "had a bad experience" with her

advisor and felt a lack of connection and guidance. She was apologetic describing her experiences, but said:

> The first meeting I came to sit down with her—I always have an idea of what I want to take next semester. She was just kind of like 'all right' and signed off on it. And I was just like—I don't know. I kind of wanted her to care a little bit and kind of check up on it. I don't know. My past advisors know the student body and know what professors are like. They say 'I would recommend this professor over this professor' based on what you are looking for in a professor. . . . It's just nice to get to know your student and kind of show a little bit of interest.

Karen was completely unfamiliar with her faculty advisor, having never had her as a professor. Her first advising appointment was disappointing. She expected more personalized attention and wanted more because she was from a more urban area than the UWSP community and was having trouble finding a close social group.

> Being at a university [as opposed to community college], you have better research opportunities. . . . I've always had advisors that get to know me. So if something does come up . . . they let you know. But I feel like I've had to find everything out on my own here, which I kind of feel like I shouldn't. I mean don't get me wrong you have to—But people who work here know what's going on and if you know this person, why not offer them stuff that this campus is going to have? I just feel [my advisor] never got to know me, my interests. Which was kind of difficult for me being, you know, way out of my element and just finding everything on my own . . . which is— I don't know—I mean if you want to do it, you got to do it

yourself. I know you can't depend on other people to do it for you. But it would

just be nice. You're here. It's not like it's your first year here.

Karen had considered changing advisors after her first advising appointment at UWSP, but by

November had decided to transfer to another university and never followed through. By the time

of Karen's interview, she had already visited the university she would be transferring to. She

described her first advising appointment at her new university:

My advisor at [new university] was just—wow. I didn't—Being from kind of not

so great advising appointments—He got to know me. We discussed

[professional/graduate] schools and prerequisites and we were even talking about

the GRE [Graduate Entrance Exam] and what his students experienced. That's

what I am kind of looking for. Then we talked about graduation requirements and

what's going on this semester that I could sign up for. You know, kind of like a

plan which I never really got here. Then we even talked about clubs on campus

that would benefit me. Like—He even talked about his biological honor society.

He's like, 'based on what you have here, you can go ahead and apply for it.' And

it was just—I was just like—It was just twenty minutes long, but I had got so

much out of it.

Her excitement about her new university was obvious. She was very apologetic about not having

a good experience at UWSP. She said, "Many students really like it here. It's just not for me."

She chalked the experience up to learning about herself, her needs, and preferences. Karen did

have another professor at UWSP who she felt was outgoing and friendly. She said she would be

comfortable going to him for advice. However, he was in a different department than her major.

Therefore, it is unclear if he would be able to offer advice on her future educational and career aspirations and additionally, would soon be leaving UWSP after not being retained.

Robert also thought the interactions he had with his first faculty advisor where lacking, but was much happier with his current faculty advisor after switching majors. He said,

He makes sure everything fits and he looks at your GDRs. He does the standard with that . . . after that he talks with you. He's like 'how's your semester going' and 'what's your plans' you know 'what's your future going to be like' stuff like that. So I kind of like that because most—like the advisor I had before, it was nothing like that. It was just in and out. . . . He just approved my schedule. There was no get to know ya. But it was my first year, so maybe it was just me.

Some students, like Robert, where charitable about their experiences at times. They would make comments like "maybe it was just me" or "maybe that is just how a university is" or "I am sure they are busy." But even so, the students desired deeper, more meaningful interactions with faculty advisors.

Several students commented on feeling that their faculty advisors were busy and that they felt rushed with advisors and professors. Some even felt their advisors were unwilling or unable to meet with them. After changing majors, Linda was assigned a faculty advisor in her new discipline. She contacted him by e-mail informing him that she was a new major and requested a meeting, but he never replied. After a second e-mail request went unaddressed, she went to his office during his posted office hours, but he was not present. Frustrated by this inattention, she requested a new advisor. At the time of her interview, she reported being very happy with her new faculty advisor.

Oliver also felt it was difficult to meet with his advisor. He had earned 2.9 and 2.8 GPA in his first two semesters at UWSP, but struggled in a five-credit science course as a first-semester sophomore. He did seek the advice of his professor, but felt rushed and thought the advice he got was inadequate:

> He said I might be able to pass and told me to just stick it out since I didn't have to take anymore [science subject] after this. . . . I thought, 'if he thinks I should stick it out, I might as well stick it out.' But it was like a five-minute talk because he had to go do something else. So I don't know. I ended up failing, but I think I should have dropped it. . . . Having more one-on-one time with your teacher would be good. I know teachers are really busy and that you can't really help that. But if they set aside more time 'cause then it would fit in with like, student schedules easier and they can go and talk to them and get more help if they need to. Instead of like— teachers have just an hour there and then other students have questions. You can't really get to them. But if they had more time or just more available time slots it would be easier on students.

It was the student's perception that professors had very busy schedules and limited time for them. Office hours often did not work with student schedules which contributed to a lack of connection with faculty members and them seeming unapproachable. Karen said of one of her professors, "His office hours were always during my—when I had class and it felt like he wasn't really willing to work with my hours." When students did seek help, the advice they got may have been based on limited input and without a complete picture. A number of times students said they desired more one-on-one time with advisors and professors and wanted more personalized attention.

Several students interviewed had faculty advisors who they had never had as a professor. In these situations the student was particularly timid about their relationship with their advisor because they were basically a stranger. Quentin had recently switched majors (and advisors) after struggling in his previous major. His relationship with his first faculty advisor was cold. The researcher asked if, before switching majors, did he feel he had anyone who he felt he could go to with questions or concerns about college. He said:

> My new advisor is Dr. [Y]. I had her for Intro to [Subject] and actually when I changed majors I asked if she could be my advisor, 'cause I thought she did a good job with the class and seemed really friendly and like who I would go ask questions to. So I feel like I could ask her. Otherwise if I have questions I would ask Dr. [Z] because I've had my second class with him now and he seems to be pretty well-rounded and bright when it comes to anything to do with any of the questions I come up with, whether it's [subject]-related or not. So I usually ask him. . . . Last semester I would have asked him, rather than track down Dr. [former faculty advisor] 'cause that was harder because I didn't have any classes with him. All he was, was my advisor, you know. So I didn't really have much of a relationship with him to go and ask him stuff.

Not all professors were seen as uncaring and too busy for students. While Quentin described his advisor as being "hard to track down" and as not having a relationship with him, he thought that generally professors were approachable. He said:

> It helps when you are in a smaller school like this. Professors kind of know you and that kind of stuff. It makes them more approachable. I think that's definitely one good thing about this school, you know. A lot of the professors seem kind of

laid back and they don't have their nose in the air at you or think that they are way

smarter than you, even though they mostly are. They kind of get down on your

level and stuff and I really appreciate that. They take the time to help you and

stuff, where if you are at a big school and you are just a number, that starts to go

away pretty quickly. So that's definitely one good positive.

Here Quentin's sentiments were positive. However, from the many other comments made

by students, UWSP has some room for improvement in the advising and mentoring area.

Several transfer students interviewed reported that advising experiences lacked

depth and seemed impersonal. For example, Ivan transferred to UWSP and therefore had

some basis for comparison:

I don't mind [my faculty advisor], but he's not my favorite. He's kind of stern,

strict. Not really strict, but just like to me—like at [my community college] I had

advisors that were actually advisors, not teachers. Here—quite a few that—

teachers are not advisors. So I just don't want to talk to him. To me, it feels like

he doesn't care about the advising as much. Kind of made me feel like I was

getting made fun of… I've had basically three years of schooling, so it's not like I

don't know how to pick my classes. That's pretty much what the advisors do.

Usually [at other colleges] they help you pick classes and also then a little bit

more. Like at [my community college], they would help you pick classes and then

interests and stuff and then say 'Well, I would advise you not going into the class,

but knowing you, you might want to do that.' Here there is just—I don't know

how to say it. There is just something lacking. Like a lack of care about me. I

know he might have 200 students to advise, but as long as you partially know

them and know at least a couple of their characteristics, it might help but—It

doesn't seem like—I mean the advisors are also teachers, so their main focus isn't

advising, it's teaching.

Ivan was dissatisfied with his advising experiences and believed that something was lacking

compared to his community college. Like several others, he associated the lack of personal

attention and care with professors being busy (assuming he was one of 200 advisees) and being

more focused on teaching than advising.

Tom did not realize he was required to see his advisor after being placed on probation,

despite the e-mail he received from the Registration and Records Office. During his interview he

said that he "did not see" what the value of meeting with his advisor would have been because he

did not see what else his advisor would have recommended beyond what he already had thought

of on his own. Tom also thought his relationship with his advisor was lacking. He said his

advisor was "alright" but seemed to be "a lot more busy" than his advisor at his community

college. He said his faculty advisor was "hard to talk to" and "hard to get to know." Tom said, "I

guess this is kind of normal for a 4-year school." Tom had never had his advisor as a professor

and had only met with him "once or twice" by the end of his second semester at UWSP, as a

transfer student this was the end of his junior year. Tom felt that he did not have a faculty or staff

member that he would really go to for advice.

One student felt he hit a road block (albeit temporary) with advising. Ben attempted to

see his faculty advisor who was confirmed in the student information system. However, he was

surprised by the faculty advisor's response:

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Ben: He told me I was no longer being advised by him and that I was no longer

his advisee anymore. He pretty much closed the door on me for the most part and

I had to figure something else out.

Researcher: Did he tell you who your advisor was?

Ben: I told him I was his advisee. He looked at his record sheet and said, 'well I

don't see it anywhere' so I had to figure something else out.

Researcher: Did he direct you to anybody else?

Ben: He directed me to [the full-time staff advisor in my college].

The faculty advisor had referred Ben to the appropriate resource for students on probation within

his major. However, it was clear that the student was not aware of this before seeking out his

faculty advisor. Subsequently, he felt rejected as it was not a smooth exchange. While students

had many positive experiences with peer and staff advisors, students had difficulty navigating the

different advising systems (i.e. peer advising, staff advising, and faculty advising) within and

between disciplines and departments. Fortunately, even after feeling like he "had the door closed"

on him, Ben did follow through with the referral and thought he got good advice from "caring"

personnel.

Advising experiences with academic staff members were quite positive for students. Two

students interviewed had received advising from their hall director. Five were advised by a full-

time academic staff advisor in their major (four were declared majors and one undeclared).

Students found full-time academic staff advisors to be very "caring, supportive, and helpful."

These students reported that staff advisors did not seem rushed and gave them more personalized

attention. They also thought the staff members gave them useful advice to help them improve

their GPA, for example reducing their credit load, retaking failed courses soon, and encouraging

them to attend tutoring.

Like Ben above, Eric experienced some confusion when navigating the various types of

advising. Eric was only a pre-major in his discipline and therefore, he had never met with a

faculty advisor before, only with peer advisors. Because of this, Eric did not follow through with

the requirement to see his advisor as instructed in the e-mail from Registration and Records.

However, no university personnel or office followed up with him when he simply neglected to

comply with this requirement.

To sum up, faculty advisors were often seen as unapproachable schedule-checkers, who

did not take much time with students. This left students feeling uncared for and unimportant.

This was made worse when faculty advisors failed to communicate with students. Students

desired more meaningful, one-on-one, personalized interactions with faculty and faculty advisors.

Students felt particularly distant from faculty advisors whom they had never taken a course with

and were intimidated or embarrassed to have probationary advising meetings with faculty

advisors whose class they had failed. There was also some confusion about different advising

systems, especially after being placed on probation. More than half of the students interviewed

(13 of 20) felt that they did not have a good relationship with their faculty advisor.

Institutional and Instructional Challenges

Academic success, as well as academic probation, is influenced by a number of factors,

including institutional and instructional issues. When challenges in these areas arise, the sense of

incongruence between the student and the institution increases. Students on academic probation

experienced a variety of institutional and instructional challenges that impacted their learning

and success. There were multiple facets of this theme, which will be described in more detail

below. Institutional challenges experienced by students included lack of seat availability in courses, perceived relevance of courses to their future, taking multiple historically-difficult courses simultaneously, and enrolling in courses well after their placement exam. Instructional challenges included: having a limited feedback or poorly timed evaluations within a courses, a mismatch of content delivery or evaluation methods to learning style, and frustrations with on-line courses. These challenges acted as roadblocks to student progress as their failure to overcome them equated to feelings of incongruence between the institution and the student. Thirteen students experience one or more of these facets of institutional or instructional challenges.

Institutional challenges were frustrating for students. Lack of seat availability meant that students could not enroll in courses they wanted to because they were already full. Subsequently, they had to enroll in less-desirable courses. Often students perceived these "left-over" courses as irrelevant to their future career or educational goals (which impacted their motivation). Some students were challenged and frustrated by having to take difficult courses together, taking courses well after their placement exam, and frequency of course offerings.

Four students commented on having to enroll in courses which they perceived to be irrelevant to their career or educational objectives because other desired courses were full. Karen had transferred to UWSP after two years at an out of state community college. She was frustrated with UWSP from the moment she registered because the classes she said she needed to eventually transfer to a professional program were already full and she was told at orientation that she could not enroll in them. She ended up enrolling in courses that she thought she did not need. She went back to her hometown after orientation overwhelmed and disappointed and re-enrolled in her community college:

I wanted to apply for [professional/graduate] school this summer. I don't have time to really waste, especially since the application takes a year. I would have to take another *whole* year. So I was in classes that—some of them went toward my degree, but I am kind of finished with all my GDRs. I was not in one biology class, not one science class, and that's *me*. Like that's my *major*. It was just odd. I left orientation completely overwhelmed. I went home and I actually registered for courses back at [my community college]. I mean they have classes they can offer me.

When Karen told her community college advisor about her enrollment experience at UWSP, he advised her to contact the department chairs at UWSP and ask to be placed on a waiting list. She followed up with his advice and ultimately ended up getting most of the courses she wanted. However, it was the advice of an advisor at another institution that helped her navigate the process.

Course availability was a frustration for Linda as well. She was trying to complete her degree in three years because her family agreed to help her with only three years of college expenses. She said, "Some courses only allow 20 students in and some are only offered every other or every third semester. And you have to take some before you can take others. For someone like me, it makes it really difficult." Any change to course offerings or having to repeat a course was an enormous stress to Linda. She had her entire college career planned out and tightly packed with courses. She took a heavy course load each semester.

Some students failed to see any relevance between their courses and their career or educational goals. For example, Fran enjoyed her plant biology professor and said he was "awesome" and "funny" but that she "just hated the class." She said, "I felt like, I am never

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going to need to know about these stupid plants. . . . Why should I take plant biology if I want to be an orthodontist?" Another student, Robert, also said, "I had to take all the generals and I did not like them at all." When students failed to see the connection between their courses and their lives, it impacted their motivation to learn the material.

Some students struggled because they were taking multiple historically-difficult courses simultaneously or when a course, such as mathematics, was taken well-after a placement exam. Historically difficult courses are courses in which high numbers of students earn a D, F, or W. At UWSP (as well as other universities) these are often courses in mathematics and sciences, but not entirely so. Courses such as chemistry, statistics, and calculus often proved to be stumbling blocks for the students interviewed, particularly when taking any two together. Three students (Penny, Oliver, and Robert) took their math placement exam in the spring before entering UWSP, but did not enroll in either math or chemistry courses until their second year (15 to 20 months later). Oliver had done well on the math placement exam and his math ACT score was 21. He said that his peer advisor had not suggested taking any math courses prior to his sophomore year. In retrospect, he thought the lack of practice for a year and a half may have made statistics and chemistry much harder. He earned a C+ and F, respectively in the courses.

Penny had achieved a 23 on her math ACT test and a 26 composite ACT score. She had achieved high honors and had taken math all four years of high school. She also had not enrolled in any math courses during her freshman year. On the recommendation of peer advisors, she took calculus and chemistry during the same semester. She earned a D in calculus and dropped chemistry. Penny also had a difficult ecology course during the same semester which she earned a C- in and one other course. She found herself overwhelmed with this combination of courses.

She achieved a 1.86 GPA that semester, after previously earning a 3.47 and 3.04 GPA during the two semesters prior.

Two students, Sara and Quentin, thought that three out of their four courses were very difficult. Neither student was a math major, but both were advised in their respective majors to take two math courses (Pre-Calculus Algebra and Pre-Calculus Trigonometry) during the same semester. They found this combination to be a considerable challenge. Even though one was an 8-week course, Sara said, "I don't recommend this unless you are a math genius." She felt defeated saying, "Having the two [math] classes [together], it's like one suffered because of the other." She managed to earn a C and C+, respectively, and Quentin earned an F and D, respectively. Neither student thought they were particularly strong in math. Upon admission to UWSP, Quentin had placed into Math 90 (Beginning Algebra). But both students had completed the proper prerequisites for the courses. Both said they put in considerable effort, spending up to three hours a day in the peer tutoring math lab in an attempt to do well in these courses. Quentin was also enrolled in an introductory computer programming course that he found to be difficult earning a C- and Sara also struggled in a 300-level science course in which she earned a D. At the time of his interview, Quentin was re-taking one of the math courses along with only two other non-math courses and felt that he was doing better. Sara re-enrolled in the 300-level science course and earned an A-.

Instructional challenges faced by students included having a limited number of evaluations, a mismatch of content delivery or evaluation methods to learning style, and frustrations with on-line courses. Courses with a small number of assignments or exams gave the illusion of a light workload, but did not foster scholarly growth and development. Students were further disadvantaged when limited assessments were administered on a problematic timeline.

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For example, Greg's grade in a mathematics course was based on only three exams. The first exam he failed, the second was given after the drop date, and the third exam was the final. Ivan had also experienced this infrequent feedback in two courses. At the time of his interview, he was enrolled in a class which was graded on exams only, no other assignments. He did not get his second exam back until after the last day to withdraw. Andy also expressed how "a couple of professors" in his major required only three papers on which the entire grade was based and that the last two came due late in the semester. He failed a course in which his entire grade was based on only two papers, the last of which was worth 60% of his final grade. Tom also earned a D in a course in which his entire grade was evaluated on only three exams, including the final.

A lack of frequent and timely feedback left students unable to gauge their progress. They questioned if their own increased efforts were enough to bring about success, if they should seek additional support, or if they should drop the course.

Some students were unable to adapt their learning style to the professor's teaching style. Karen had taken AP science courses in high school and had graduated with high honors. She earned a scholarship to attend college, and came to UWSP with a 3.6 GPA from her community college:

> I took hard classes and I knew they were going to be hard. I just expected more
> from the campus, teachers-wise. I don't mean to be picking on [the professor
> whose class I failed]. . . . His teaching style and my learning style never
> clicked. . . . He did a whole PowerPoint thing for [science course] which is
> hard . . . and something you have never learned before . . . and going so fast
> through the PowerPoints and kind of like expecting—I couldn't do it.

Karen earned an F in the course. While one could say Karen may have had an external locus of control since she blamed the professor for his teaching style. However, she re-enrolled the following semester with a different professor and earned a B. The second professor had a delivery format which was much slower and worked out problems on the board. Karen thought this mode worked better for her learning style.

Sara was another student who struggled with the content delivery format, evaluation format, and frequency of evaluations in an upper-level science course:

I really struggled on the exams in that course. I don't know if it was the volume of the material, because we would go through—He would do PowerPoint slides and he would pull the information for the tests from the slides. But when you've got like four chapters and almost 50 slides per chapter and you're supposed to remember all of that and you are being tested on four or five chapters at a time. I just had a really hard time—and it was multiple choice and that is apparently no longer my strong suit. . . . It wasn't that the material was hard. It was just hard to remember so much of it. I think there were four exams, but we covered *a lot*. I asked questions and I did really well when we had to do a paper. I didn't have any trouble when we had to do that, but it was always these exams. He took pride and pleasure in tricking you by switching up one word. I didn't feel like he really wanted his students to be successful all the time because he would tell our class, 'I don't expect you guys to get better than a 70 on this' and that didn't seem to bother him a bit.

Sara earned a D in the course she referred to above. After her interview, she contacted the researcher again for advice. This allowed for follow up about her re-enrollment in the

same course. She had completed the course again during the summer, but with a different

professor who had a different delivery style and evaluation techniques. She earned an A-

with the second professor. She said the following about the second-attempt course:

> The class was very different. First, I thought the instructor was amazing! I
>
> understood her explanations very well. She was fabulous at explaining difficult
>
> concepts in easy to understand terms. Secondly, it was writing emphasis so there
>
> was no multiple choice. Every answer had to be done completely from memory
>
> and written in paragraph form on blank sheets of paper in my words and
>
> interpretations. That was easier for me than trying to figure out what an instructor
>
> wants based on how they word things. In short, what makes you or breaks you in
>
> a class is who teaches it, how they teach it compared to how you learn, the
>
> attitudes of both student and teacher, the amount of time you are expected to
>
> retain what you learn, and any previous experience or lack thereof with the
>
> material. All in that order of what affects you the most and what affects you the
>
> least. Some teachers are much more difficult in their expectations than others and
>
> some compare you to other students with different experience and learning styles
>
> thinking it's a motivator when it's not, etc.

Sara was on her way to figuring out what worked well for her and what did not. She now knew

what types of content delivery and evaluation techniques were critical to her success.

Eric had a similar frustration with teaching and evaluation methods. He stated how he

liked to demonstrate skills and do "hands-on activities, like labs." He excelled in labs, but found

the three multiple-choice exams in a science class, which made up 75% of his grade, to be

"mind-boggling." He got frustrated analyzing "four answers when one word is the difference

between right or wrong." Tom shared Eric's frustration and desired more opportunities for active learning. He said his community college classes were "very hands-on" and described activities where the class often met at the river to learn about natural resource concepts. He said, "Here [at UWSP], it's just a lecture and a lab and lectures just get old." Tom found it difficult to adjust his learning style to the teaching style most often found at UWSP. He was not planning to return to UWSP the following year and was instead joining the military.

Robert also struggled with course evaluation methods, course delivery and the professor's demeanor. He said,

> I struggle on multiple choice. . . . That class is all PowerPoints . . . and that teacher is still like that. You can ask anybody. He's really hard. It's just the way he teaches. Really monotone. No enthusiasm. It's really hard to pay attention to a teacher who has no enthusiasm about a subject. I struggle on that one. I think it is just how he teaches. It's just his way. He's been teaching for quite a long time I think. He knows his stuff. It's just how he presents it to students, especially freshman and sophomore students. . . . I have him again now [that I am a senior] and he is a lot better. He still teaches the same way, but he's teaching more higher up classes and there is less people in there and so now I think he can relate to us a little more. I think the freshman classes he was more going through the motions. It probably bores him too.

Robert was suggesting a mismatch of target level. He thought the delivery style of this professor was more effective with more advanced students, but less effective with freshman and sophomore students.

Crystal, an African-American student, was very frustrated by a professor with a thick accent and dry delivery style:

"My [subject] teacher is horrible. I hate that class with a passion. First of all, I can't understand a word he is saying. And he jumps around. He barely speaks English. I skip that class a lot because I find it easier to go read. . . . I will go [to class] more around quizzes in case he adds anything else. My roommate has that class too and we skip a lot because we get so mad. We can't stand to listen to him because we don't know what he is saying and he is so, like, boring and monotone. And he repeats himself, whatever he *is* saying, because *he knows* we can't understand him."

Crystal was so frustrated with her professor's delivery style that she often skipped class and just read the textbook. However, recall from earlier that Crystal did not consider herself "a reader" and had poor study habits. She ended up earning a D in the course.

Course delivery mode was also a challenge for students. Three students commented about their frustrations with on-line courses. As an Accounting major, Eric was comfortable using technology. He was enrolled in an on-line course that was not accounting. He said he "liked the concept of on-line courses" but didn't like "how it was set up." He said he "preferred a print book over the computer for information." He found scrolling through multiple screens for information to be "troubling" and was frustrated when the on-line course management system was off-line and not working. He concluded that it was "just a big hassle" and "hard to manage."

Two students said about the same on-line course they were not clear when they registered if the course was on-line or face-to-face. One said that her advisor also was not certain. One of these students had been trying to "steer clear of on-line courses" because of a previous bad

experience. Crystal was unhappy with her hybrid (part on-line and part face-to-face) course because she kept forgetting to go on-line to do assignments:

> Everything is on D2L [the online course management system] and I always forget about it. And that has ruined me. Even if I have done the reading and then I miss the period [to turn in the assignment]. Even though it is up for days or whatever just like, because it's on D2L. I don't think about it even though I go on the computer several times a day. I don't—I don't know. I would rather have quizzes in class.

Crystal also commented on the technical difficulties of when the system was down and how the instructor would then reschedule or postpone due dates. She found these details and changes hard to manage and keep up with.

Fran did well with her on-line course in the beginning of the semester. As she got busier, the on-line course was easier to forget. She was uneasy about the lack of face-to-face interaction and thought the online format to be impersonal:

> It was fine in the beginning until when mid-terms [exams] would come up [in other courses] and then I would just put it in the back of my head and not just think about it. Because it was something you could do on your own time, rather than go into it and actually learn something. It was interesting, but I don't think I would take another on-line course again. . . . It's nice knowing what your professor looks like. I mean, I don't even know who he was or anything. It was really—It was weird I guess.

At the time of her interview, Fran was currently enrolled in a hybrid course. In this format she met with her classmates and professor twice per week, but completed all

assignments on-line. She was enjoying the hybrid format much better than the purely on-line format.

Institutional and instructional challenges such as lack of seat availability in courses, taking courses well-past their placement test, taking several historically-difficult courses together, and facing a mismatch of teaching or evaluation style to their learning style were issues that students felt powerless against. They had few options for working around these challenges. Instead, it was often necessary to re-take classes they did poorly in, lengthening their time to degree and limiting their academic integration.

Reluctance to Seek Help

Pursuing additional support when faced with challenges represents a strong desire to adjust when faced with challenges. This commitment is one of the key elements to college persistence. However, poorer performing students are less likely to search out assistance to reverse their underachievement (Balduf, 2009). Reluctance to seek help was the fourth most common theme that emerged. Nine of the 20 students interviewed saw their own reluctance as a barrier to academic progress. Students were reluctant to ask questions in class due to what they perceived as large class sizes. Others were unable to express their needs and some expressed feeling intimidated by professors. Additionally, some students felt a sociocultural pressure to be independent and feared being judged by others if they sought help.

After ending up on academic probation, John readily sought the help of tutors and found them to very helpful. However, he was reluctant to seek help in class due to the large number of other students. Having graduated in a high school class of only 60 students, he was accustomed to classes with only 15 students. In high school he felt like he had a close enough relationship with his teachers that "they were able to customize explanations" when he had questions. He

found lectures with 100 students to be too intimidating to ask questions and wished he had more one-on-one time with professors.

Robert expressed the idea that large class sizes changed the way in which he was used to interacting with professors. He did not blame professors, but did think that class size played a role in his difficulties at UWSP:

Basically that first semester it's just a transition of professors I guess. Cause like at [my community college] it was the same teachers. I think I only had a total of—for the two years there, I think I only had 5 teachers there. And they really get to know you and work with you one-on-one a lot more. Here [at UWSP] it's more, you know, the class sizes are huge compared to up there [at my community college]. Up there I think there is only like 15 to 20 people in a class, in every class, and it's the same people in every class. So teachers got to know you. And here it's auditoriums and stuff and teachers really can't get to know you on those levels or help you one-on-one as much as they probably would like to. It's not like their fault, but I think that was one of the reasons I kind of struggled.

Robert was intimidated to talk to professors outside of class as well and perceived them to be uncaring, especially early in his college career. As he persisted at UWSP, he found most professors to be less intimidating:

When you come into a four-year college, you almost feel like professors don't care. . . . But if you sit down with them, I think they do care. They do want you to know—I think every professor would love to see you all get As, but . . . they are busy too. So it probably comes off like they don't care. You know. I think when you first come here, you are almost intimidated by them. It's almost like you are

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scared to go talk to them and say you need help. And I mean some professors

really don't give a damn. I mean that's the way I felt with them. But I would say

three quarters to 90% of them do care and if you approached them, they would

help you if they have time. But I think when you first come here it feels like

they—you're intimidated. It feels like—'These people they don't care. All they

care about is the money and that's it.' You know.

Most of the students interviewed came from small towns. In fact, the majority of UWSP students

come from towns with fewer than 50,000 people. Students were out of their element in

classrooms with 40 or more other students. They saw themselves as insignificant in such a large

setting with so many others.

When Sara visited a professor about how to improve in his course, she was made

to feel inadequate, which dissuaded her from seeking help in the future:

I tried to talk to him about how I could improve. He didn't make me feel better.

He actually made me feel worse. Where he basically implied that I was the

stupidest student in his class. . . . He said that he was really disappointed in my

work because I literally got the lowest grade in the class. It was just the way it

was worded. It was kind of like I am the biggest disappointment. Thanks. Thanks,

a lot. And he didn't offer any suggestions either. So I was like, well I guess I just

wasted my time talking to you. I really felt after having that class, like what's the

point of going to talk to an instructor and asking questions if you still end up

doing really poorly?

It was likely not the intention of the faculty member to make Sara feel inadequate. However, his communication with her did result in negative feelings toward faculty and toward seeking help from faculty.

Crystal was reluctant to ask for help because she put pressure on herself to articulate her course difficulties into specific questions: "I guess it's not knowing how to ask. A lot of times I don't really have a *question*. I just want someone to go through it with me. Like with math. I just don't know what to ask." In a sense, students such as this know they are missing something. But either cannot or are unwilling to express what. Unfortunately, they go about their learning on their own when they might benefit from some guidance.

Eric was "uncomfortable" asking for help from others who he didn't know: "I have a hard time talking to people about my problems." He had never visited the tutoring center for help before his interview for this study. He was also uncomfortable asking questions in class because he felt he might be judged by other students:

> It sort of feels like telling—I am not saying that I am stupid, but like—sometimes
> I feel that way. Like I don't get this and even if they try to teach me, I just feel
> like I just can't get a hang of it. So that's why— it's like an easy question. But I
> can't get it and everyone else can. So I don't usually ask questions in class
> because I feel like—maybe [the professor] already answered that before or maybe
> it is an obvious question. I just feel like people—or not just people but like—just
> saying 'oh, he doesn't know that' so it just makes me hold back.

Greg stated that "asking for help almost sounds like you've been defeated and for guys that is a big issue. I guess it's just imbedded in us men. I guess there is glory in having done it on your own." When Ben was asked if he was reluctant to seek help, he said:

You hit the nail on the head. I think it is more the independent factor. I really feel

like I can do this on my own and that if I can do it on my own I wouldn't need

any help after that. And I keep believing that I can do it by myself and just any

kind of help would just leave me embarrassed or just— or embarrassing the tutor

in a sense that I don't know what I am doing or that I don't know what to tell the

person. I don't know it's just so many factors of— stubbornness just kick in. That

male side of me . . . doesn't want to ask for help.

Several (especially male) students admitted to being reluctant to seek help. Hayden had

admitted to not studying much outside of class and prioritizing social activities. He was

(unknowingly) enrolled in one of the most difficult courses on campus and knew he was

struggling. His response about reluctance was perhaps the most surprising: "Even though

there was offers for group tutoring and individual tutoring, I just—I didn't take it because

I was foolish. It was my own damn fault plain and simple." When pressed further to

explain why he thought he had not taken advantage of these opportunities for help he said:

I already have a problem asking for help in any way, shape, or form. So going to

these things openly is just something against my nature. Like—I think I have

come down to [the tutoring center] this semester 10, 11 times. Come down to this

room and just turned around. I just couldn't do it [actually walk into the tutoring

center]. It was more of a fear thing and less of a pride thing. It's a fear of being

judged about it. Even though I know from a personal standpoint that asking for

help is in no way, shape, or form a sign of weakness, that really it is. That

somehow that this—that I'm less of a person than someone who just chugs

through it on their own. The good news is that now that I have been down here

once, I am probably going to be down here as often as I can. Because once I break

that one-time barrier, then I am set. Then I can just walk in anytime I want.

For Hayden there was hope. He had finally broken through his reluctance barrier and

thought he would be much more comfortable in the future asking for help or at least

seeking help in the form of tutoring.

As the theme of reluctance began to emerge, students were asked how the university

might assist with breaking down the reluctance barrier that many students seem to have. Few had

any creative ideas. Matt was of the opinion that the university had limited power over the actions

of students and that it was the responsibility of the student to seek help:

It's the people who have problems who need to go out and say, 'I need help' and I

really don't know how you can get students to go up and say, 'I need help' more

than they do. I think a lot of them just feel embarrassed that well, 'I need help and

I just don't want to deal with this and I am just going to do bad and do what I

can. . . . You just have to break the stigma that we are all given as little kids. I

mean it's a lot to do. It's a lot to ask for. It's just something you grow up. You

don't cry. You don't ask for help. You do it yourself. So to do that [break the

stigma] would be monumental. That would be Ph.D. work.

At that comment, the researcher and Matt had a good laugh together.

Reluctance to seek help was explored further with Matt. He was asked, who could say

what, in what context to make him feel like it was okay to ask for help. After a long pause, Matt

speculated that he would be more open to receiving help if the message came from someone who

he had a closer relationship with. He first named his wife. Matt was one of the few students who

felt as though his faculty advisor cared about him and he thought he had a good relationship with

her. When asked if he would seek help such as tutoring or counseling if his advisor suggested he do so, he said he would.

Many of the students interviewed, especially males, used language to describe a deeply-ingrained, sociocultural value of independence as strength. They used words such as "showing weakness," "being judged," "embarrassed," "fear," pride," and even "feeling like less than others." For many students, reaching out for help on their own was an incredible obstacle to overcome.

Knowledge and Use of Support Services

In addition to faculty and advisors, support services such as tutoring, career services, counseling, and disabilities services can assist students as they adjust to the academic and social communities of the institution. The majority of students choose to leave college because this adjustment and integration is unsuccessful. Several of the students either were not aware of one or more of the various support services available to students or were not aware of the extent of the services provided. Additionally, some students made assumptions about the type and structure of assistance offered by the various offices.

Greg who claimed to "struggle with the blank page syndrome" was unaware of the scope of the help that writing tutors could provide. He thought he had to go to the writing center with a final draft to get help. But actually writing center tutors help at all stages of the writing process, from the brainstorming or pre-writing stage through multiple drafts. Linda also said she assumed she would need to "drop off a final draft [at the writing center] and pick it up later." She felt that her paper may not be returned to her in enough time because her assignments were often due only two or three days after they were assigned. But in reality, students are not allowed to drop off papers at the writing lab. Rather, students sit side-by-side with a writing tutor to discuss the

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paper together. When told this during her interview, Linda was surprised and pleased. She said that she "would definitely use" the writing center the following semester when she would be taking a writing-emphasis[ii] course.

Fran was not aware that tutoring was offered during the day because she said, "It seemed like people were always getting tutoring at night and I was always working." Even though she was enrolled in a course that had received e-mails promoting both evening group tutoring and daytime one-on-one tutoring, what stuck in her mind was her peers attending the evening groups and that is all she remembered.

Linda found it difficult to use support services such as tutoring. She was unable to attend the tutoring group offered for the chemistry course she failed because it conflicted with one of her evening classes. This had been the case for her in the previous semester for a different course that she ended up dropping. She said she found it valuable to work with other students to process information. Therefore, she wished tutoring groups were offered more than once per week to better accommodate her schedule.

Several students had used the career center for help with their résumés. However, that was the extent of their knowledge about the office. During their interviews, students were surprised to hear that they could take a number of assessments at the career center to help them identify majors or careers that might work well with their interests and abilities.

Some students failed to recall anything about support services because it was not something they needed when the information came to them and it was therefore quickly dismissed. This was the case for Robert regarding the counseling center. He said, "I probably got an e-mail about it, but you know, it's one of those things where you're like 'nope' [I don't need it] and you just delete, delete, delete everything and you don't really look into it." Quentin also

was unfamiliar with any support services and disconnected from campus events. He said, "I just put in my time in my classes and study at the library in between. I guess I really didn't realize [college] was a lifestyle."

Fran was not aware of the career center. She vaguely recalled hearing about the counseling center during orientation, but could not remember anything about it. Eric was not aware of the counseling center or the career center. He assumed they had been discussed at orientation. However, his orientation was in May, four months before he began taking classes.

However, there were also students who knew of and made use of support services. Penny, a sophomore student, said,

> I think the university does a pretty good job of getting the word out that they have
>
> a Tutoring-Learning Center and stuff like that. I think that tutoring is a good idea.
>
> I knew about it my freshman year, a couple weeks into my freshman year. . . . I
>
> don't think it's a matter of student not knowing about it. I think it is just their
>
> willingness to go.

Penny believed tutoring services were well-advertised, but that students may be reluctant and embarrassed to make use of them.

Some students who had used services, such as peer tutoring, often did so too late to have an impact on their success in a course. After Matt returned from his three weeks in jail, he went to the peer tutoring math lab. He said, "They were very helpful, but I only had three days to comprehend three weeks of material." Greg stated that during the semester that he was placed on probation, he attended tutoring groups, but began attending "way too late to do much good."

The following semester Greg started much earlier and said it helped a lot, but felt he had benefitted more from an individual tutor. At the time of his interview, he had only recently started seeing a one-on-one tutor but said:

The private [one-on-one] tutor feels like an *immense—a lot* of help. It's a huge step between the two [group vs. one-on-one tutoring]. I don't know how to describe it. It's *so* much more personal. You get so much more information. It's a huge leap in help.

At the time of her interview, Nancy was very happy with the tutors she was seeing for a forestry course and a chemistry course. She said,

For forestry, I think she is a good tutor. What we do, we go over our homework and she explains things really well so you understand it. . . . For chemistry that *definitely* helps going to group and—sometimes I can't go cause I am working, but the individual [tutoring session] helps *a lot*. 'Cause she just explains it more and it's more of a one-on-one and she is more on my level. Like my teacher, I feel like he is way up here and um, it's just like, explaining more and getting more practice with like, problems I think is a *huge* thing.

Greg had a course requirement to create a résumé and take it to the career center to get evaluated. Lacking information to include on his résumé encouraged him to get involved in more campus activities. He thought the experience was quite helpful. The students who had used support services spoke about how much they gained from personal attention. It helped to put them more at ease by offering guidance and reassurance.

While it was speculated that students were reluctant to use support services, it was clear that some students were simply unaware of services available to them. Many were unclear about

the extent of the support services provided and were unclear about how services were delivered. Students who had used support services such as tutoring and the Career Center were very happy with the assistance that was provided.

Interference from Disabilities

Interference from disabilities can have an impact on learning and academic performance. However, students with disabilities can be just as successful in college as those without disabilities. Strategies or medication can help students with some disabilities to be more successful and accommodations, which they are legally entitled to, can level the playing field between them and students without disabilities. Four of the twenty students interviewed had been diagnosed with disabilities including anxiety, learning disabilities, and ADD/ADHD. Three others suspected they might have ADD or ADHD. Students with disabilities, who do not have a diagnosis, are a particular concern because they likely have not been educated about how to manage it.

Ben had been diagnosed with a form of anxiety disorder in high school. He had attended therapy and had several strategies to manage it. His desire to have more test review opportunities in his courses and one-on-one time with professors suggested that his anxiety may still affect him at times, although, these requests were common among other students as well. However, Ben reported deep depression when being notified that he was on academic probation. Ben was not registered with disability services and therefore was not receiving any accommodations.

Greg had been diagnosed with a mild learning disability in high school. However, a more recent evaluation did not qualify him. He said he processed information slowly, but had always worked hard to make up for it. Due to the most recent evaluation, he was also not registered with disability services or receiving accommodations.

Hayden, a very socially-involved transfer student, constantly shifted in the chair during his interview. He talked in an excited manner throughout the interview and discussed his learning differences:

I have mental blocks with anything specific, extremely specific-letters and numbers. I can't spell and math has always been a challenge for me. I thanked *God* and everything I could possibly thank when spell check was invented. . . . Math is just—it's just something I *really* have to work at and I am more likely to take the easy road and not do the work required with it. I don't really know if there is any disease that goes with that. Probably not. Probably just laziness.

Hayden not aware if he had, and was not diagnosed with, any type of learning disability, but had been diagnosed with ADHD. When asked if he was taking medication for it he said, "I stopped taking my ADD medication three years ago. I consider it a win." Hayden equated his lack of academic focus to "laziness," rather than his diagnosed but currently untreated ADHD. Laziness was not the term that came to mind when observing this energetic young man who was "always out doing something with friends." He seemed to deny his condition, considering it overcome when he went without medication. Tom also had been diagnosed with ADD as a child and had also stopped taking his medication. The researcher has met with numerous students over the years at UWSP who have gone off their ADD/ADHD medications since entering college. Neither Hayden nor Tom were registered with or receiving accommodations from disability services.

David suspected he might have ADHD and showed many signs of a typical student with ADHD. He kept himself very busy with social activities and intramural sports, but rarely schoolwork. He found it difficult to study in the dorms because of the active social atmosphere.

Throughout the interview he continuously fidgeted with a pencil and tapped it on the desk, indicative of some of the hyperactivity often displayed by those with ADHD. David missed and rescheduled his interview appointment four times before finally attending. He described his challenges:

> I have a difficult time applying myself. I like applying myself in courses that I enjoy. If I am doing a course because it's required or because of some other reason besides my engagement in the topic, I feel I don't apply myself in those courses. I am very good at procrastinating, which I don't enjoy on most occasions. It's obvious by my grades. Last semester I got three As and two Fs. It was like that in high school as well, As and Fs all over the board. . . . I feel like I learn the material, but I just don't apply myself on assignments and tests.

David had ACT scores in the 30s, yet had four unsuccessful semesters (out of four) at UWSP. With such high ACT scores, the introductory courses he had failed were a surprise. David was asked to reflect on the courses he had been successful in and consider why he thought he was able to apply himself in those courses. He replied:

> Through the years—I think some of it has to do with how congenial the instructor is. You can tell if they are interested in the subject. If they're not, I am not a fan of that. . . . It's their energy, I guess. I don't know. I've never really thought about this in-depth before. I probably should have. Yeah. For sure.

David seemed to turn off when his instructors did not capture his attention. People with ADD/ADHD often have trouble focusing on tasks that are not interesting to them, but can hyper-focus on tasks they find stimulating or rewarding. When asked if he had ADHD, he said that a teacher in the past had suggested that he get tested, but that his parents did not want to medicate

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him. Therefore, he was never tested. The semester of his interview ended up being David's fifth

unsuccessful semester and he was suspended again.

Nancy, who said she lacked study skills and also had some difficult family issues,

questioned if she had ADD:

> Sometimes I think that I just have a mild case of ADD 'cause it runs in my family
>
> and I wouldn't be surprised if I have it. But, like I am a *major* daydreamer and
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> like, I will try to sit down and be like, just daydreaming and I'll read the same
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> sentence like ten times and I don't get it and I get so frustrated.

Nancy did not display the hyperactivity that David and Hayden demonstrated during their

interviews. However, John did display some hyperactivity, although to a lesser degree than the

other two students. John seemed very similar to David. He had higher than average ACT scores

(composite score of 25), extensive involvement in intramural sports, hours playing video games

and socializing, difficulty apply himself in courses he found to be "boring," and difficulty with

time management. In the semester in which he was interviewed, he was receiving considerable

tutoring in two courses and claimed to be studying multiple hours per week. Despite such effort,

he failed both courses. John suggested that his lack of success might be simply because he

disliked the class. John was not aware if he had ADHD or not. It seemed likely that both John

and David had ADHD. If so, that would bring the total to four students interviewed who were

struggling in college, likely due to untreated ADD/ADHD. Students without the hyperactivity

symptoms are less easy to identify. Therefore, the total may actually be five if Nancy was also

included as having ADD.

Students with disabilities often struggle to find success in college. Students with learning

disabilities have difficulty processing and retrieving information. Students with ADD/ADHD

have trouble finishing schoolwork or performing tasks that require concentration, such as studying and taking exams. They often find it difficult to focus on material that is of little interest to them, although they can hyper-focus on subjects or activities that capture their attention. Students with anxiety find that their condition can be exacerbated when they have academic stressors. They can have feelings of inadequacy and slip into depression when they do not succeed.

Financial Challenges

Unmet financial need can impact how a student manages their life while in college. The more a student works, especially off-campus, the less they interact with the academic and social environment on campus. The more time that is spent in pursuit of earning money, the more likely students are to perform poorly on academics. With the exception of one, most of the students interviewed worked fewer than the maximum recommended 20 hours per week. In fact, many of them did not work at all. However, six of the students interviewed had note-worthy financial concerns. Six students, including two of the six with financial concerns, were Pell Grant recipients. For those students interviewed with financial difficulties, time devoted to the pursuit of money was an issue as well as the stress about finances. This could have impacted their ability to perform well academically.

Matt received a Pell Grant, but as a non-traditional student also had a family to support. He said:

> The worse my stress about money is, the less I focus on school. I have a wife and
> kid to take care of. Our lease is up at the end of the month, so now we are looking
> for a cheaper place to live. . . . I've been looking for a job non-stop. . . . My
> transmission went out a month and a half ago and that blew through our savings.

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We don't have a security deposit. We don't have first month's rent. It would be

easier if I could just find a job for, you know, 200 bucks a week.

Matt said some of his highest achieving semesters occurred when he was working 20

hours or more per week because he felt confident and capable.

David also had financial challenges. He made sure to confirm (and was grateful) to be

offered free tutoring for the remainder of the semester after completing his interview for this

study. He said he had not used tutoring before because he "didn't have $15.00" (the fee for group

tutoring). When asked whether he had applied for financial aid, he said he was only offered loans.

His dad discouraged him from taking loans "because of the interest" and instead was "helping"

David pay for tuition and groceries. However, he said that during his freshmen year, all the

money he made was from "selling drugs around campus." He eventually decided that selling

drugs "was not a good idea" and stopped.

Crystal was greatly concerned about money. She received financial aid, including a Pell

Grant. She had been issued eight parking tickets by both the campus and the city because she

was afraid of the dark and therefore parked as close as she could (physically, although not

always legally) to her destination. She said that in the dark it was not always discernable whether

she was actually parking legally or not. Her mother had recently lost her job. Crystal had also

lost her job at a residence hall front desk for being late three times. Crystal's stress over lack of

money had physical effects on her and she started using prescription drugs in an attempt to cope:

Recently, um, I started taking—medicine, to help me focus. Like with being

stressed with the money stuff, I sleep a lot more when I am stressed. So they help

me stay awake. I'll be 'oh I am so tired I don't want to do this' but then they help

me stay awake and then I can stay up and get everything done that I need. It's

helping, but it's hard to get a hold of because I don't have a prescription. So I get

it from a friend.

When asked what type of "medicine" she had began taking, Crystal responded that it was

Adderall, a medication used to treat ADD/ADHD. After a second participant, David, mentioned

using Adderall without a prescription (in order to play video games 24 hours straight), the

researcher asked whether he knew if this behavior was widespread among students. He said,

"Yes, I know quite a few who use it. Some kids with prescriptions don't take it every day and

then sell their extra pills to others."

Linda, a highly dedicated and hard-working student, was also concerned about money.

Her family, who ran a small business, said they would support her for the first three years of

college. Therefore, she was trying to finish her degree in three years by taking courses year-

round including summer and winter sessions. However, she was also trying not to be too much of

a financial burden, so she also worked. Linda and her family were either confused or unaware

about how financial aid and the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) worked.

Linda said that she did not receive federal financial aid because her family was self-

employed. When pressed further to explain, she said that because her parents were small

businesses owners, they had to wait until "everybody else had filed their taxes" before her family

could file theirs. Since her family had not done their taxes, they never filled out the FAFSA. This

did not make any sense to the researcher, who then enquired with a small business owner about

what this family might be thinking. The researcher was told that many small business owners ask

for an extension on their taxes. This may be because they owe money when taxes are due or

because while they have been collecting taxes from customers, they may have spent it for

business or even living expenses. It might also be because they simply can get an extension and

continue to earn interest on the money for a longer amount of time. However, applying for an extension on their taxes puts them behind on priority deadlines to complete the FAFSA and possibly be awarded better types of financial aid. This has the effect, however, of disadvantaging the family and student even further.

Fran was also unaware of how financial aid worked and was working 30 hours a week to pay for college. She had not applied for financial aid through the FAFSA form and said she definitely thought she should. When asked if she understood the financial aid process, she replied, "A lot of my friends do it and they say they get so much money back. I am just amazed. . . . So I definitely want to look into it, like probably in the summer and apply for it." Unfortunately for Fran, the priority deadline for completing the FAFSA form is March 15. Like Linda above, while she still could apply during the summer, she might not be considered for some of the better aid such as grants.

Penny also was concerned about money and had not completed the FAFSA form. She also seemed to have some misunderstandings about financial aid. She had three siblings who were also going to be in college soon, but were not currently. She said that a friend of hers had "not been offered anything" through the financial aid application and felt that her friend's financial situation was not nearly as bad off as hers. So she "did not think it was going to be worth it" to fill out the form. The researcher informed Penny that because her siblings were going to be in college in a few months, it would definitely be worth applying this year.

Six students mentioned serious concerns about money matters. Some had applied for financial aid and been convinced by family members that it was not in their best interest to accumulate debt. Others had not applied for financial aid, lacking knowledge or having misinformation about the process or requirements. Stress over money caused one student to turn

to prescription drugs to cope and another turned to selling marijuana to earn money. Students whose parents were small business owners had misinformation or a lack of information about the process for applying for financial aid and the potential benefits.

Family, Personal, and Social Challenges

Family, personal, or social issues can impact a student's integration into the college. A certain amount of separation from family and high school friends is necessary for students to integrate into the social and academic community of the university. Usually less contact with these individuals allows for greater integration into the university. However, when a student's family or personal life is unstable, it can serve to pull a student's focus away from academics and back to the family or their personal issues. Similarly, when integration into the social or academic community of the university is unsuccessful, it can serve to push the student back home where they feel more stable and accepted. Family, personal, or social issues were a challenge for five participants.

David and Eric both said that they chose to attend UWSP because it was far away from home. When asked why he chose to attend UWSP, Eric said, "My family—I like to be away from family because I—troubled times. I wanted to go to Green Bay, but at the same time, it was too close to home. I wanted to just get away." Another student, David, said he was trying to escape the pressures and responsibilities of home.

Nancy's parents were going through a divorce during the semester she ended up on probation. The situation had an impact on her relationship with her brother as well. He had stopped communicating with her. She said, "It was a very rough time." She definitely felt that her focus on her family had an impact on her grades.

Karin was having a difficult time adjusting to the social community at UWSP. She was from a more urban area and was accustomed to doing more urban recreational activities like shopping. The young women who she interacted with did not enjoy shopping. Rather, they took Karin fishing and to the river, which she did not enjoy and felt "out of her element." Karin was also from a divorced family. Her father was an alcoholic and she had not communicated with him in years. Karin's social group all came from traditional families and she felt they did not understand her situation. Karin had not found friends who could identify with her interests or personal characteristics and she felt out of place at UWSP. She did not return to UWSP the following semester, but instead transferred to another university.

Linda, a highly dedicated student, had been frustrated by a professor's lack of flexibility when it came to personal issues. She had "rushed home" when her uncle unexpectedly died at the age of 39. She was told by one professor that because she had not informed him in advance, her assignment was late and she lost points. She said, "I work hard. I don't ask for exceptions, so when I need something, I really need something."

Matt had a difficult home life while growing up. His parents were divorced. He said his mother had "had some trouble with her kids" and that she had "not always been the greatest ma." He had recently begun speaking to his mother again after seven years of her being absent from his life and after the recent birth of his child. Having served time in prison, Matt found it difficult to find employment in a down economy. Life was not easy for him, his wife, or his child. More of Matt's story, including his continued legal troubles, will be told in the extended absence section below.

Some participants came from dysfunctional family lives which they described as "difficult," "troubled," or that "they were trying to escape." They seemed to carry this burden

with them into college. Their disposition was somber. Other participants were dealing with more immediate crises such as parents divorcing, death in the family, legal trouble, financial pressures, and not identifying with a social group.

Extended Absences

Most of the students interviewed were primarily enrolled in traditional courses where course content was delivered in the classroom. This is the dominant delivery format at UWSP and it works well for most students most of the time. However, when students are faced with situations where they must miss class for long periods of time, it can severely impact their ability to be successful. Nonetheless, these situations are often unavoidable. Three of the twenty students interviewed had extended absences during the semester that they ended up on probation.

Two students reported having the H1N1 flu virus. The campus strongly encouraged ill students not to attend class to avoid a campus epidemic and stipulated that professors accommodate student absences due to illness. These two students each missed three weeks of classes. One was Linda, a highly dedicated student who was trying to complete her degree in three years. To do so, she had taken a heavy course load of 17 credits and was furious when her illness caused her to miss class. The other student was David (possibly ADHD, intramural sports addict, four unsuccessful semesters out of four). Both said that their professors were very understanding, communicated with them through e-mail, and let them make up the work. Linda felt that missing the lectures was a huge disadvantage to doing well on assignments and tests.

The third student with extended absences was Matt. Now 25 years old, he had been a 4.0 GPA student in high school, but went to prison two weeks before graduating.

He had served 44 months in prison where he completed his GED and was currently on (legal) probation. He was trying to get his life back in order and had maintained a 2.25 GPA during his first six semesters at UWSP. He had never before been on academic probation until the semester prior to his interview where he earned a 1.40 GPA. Matt described how at the end of fall semester his wife had "bounced two checks" from their joint checking account. In accordance with the conditions of his legal probation, the police followed up on the insufficient funds incident. He admitted to arguing with the police because he did not know she had written the checks. Subsequently, he was placed on a "probation hold" and sent back to jail:

> I missed three weeks of classes and all of sudden math doesn't make sense and I'm a week from finals and I can't—I'm trying to get everything straight in life because life is more important than school. I bombed my final and it was just a really rough go at it. Everything was in the B range before that. But I missed assignments; I tried to talk to professors. I did what I could, but there is only so much you can do at that point. All my professors were understanding .They really were. [Dr. X] was the professor for two of my classes. He let me catch up as much as he could, but said 'it's only fair I let you do this much because you missed three weeks and it wasn't really your fault, but you still missed it so—' He let me get in everything I could and we went from there. Then for math, I went to the [peer tutoring] math lab and I did everything I could but I still—the final was *really* hard and I'm really good at math so it really depressed me because I'm usually better than that.

Matt reported that Dr. X regularly audio recorded all his lectures and shared them with students. However, with the absence of video, Matt could not see the professor's work on the chalkboard. He felt this was detrimental along with the short period of time he had between being let out of jail and taking the final exam. One professor did not let Matt make up the work he missed because the course is treated like the business world.

Students felt that their extended absences severely impacted their grades. Professors allowed students with extended absences to make up the work that was due during the weeks they missed. However, this flexibility did not sufficiently replace the full experience of classroom instruction.

Compounding Challenges

As student challenges compound, they are more likely to impact learning and success. This can equate to a lack of social or academic integration which can influence student persistence in college. It is important to remember that students had multiple experiences and challenges that interacted, worked together, and compounded. No student had just one challenge. Each had multiple challenges and no two student's challenges were exactly the same.

In Matt's case, his previous legal involvement made it difficult to find employment. This caused money problems for his family, which triggered more legal involvement and resulted in an extended absence from courses. While his professors were understanding about the absence and let him make up some of the work, he did not have the proper tools such as video recorded lectures in order to sufficiently learn the material. In the end, he failed calculus, earned a D in another course and ended up on academic probation.

David is also an interesting case. Years earlier, David's family was encouraged to have him tested for ADHD, but because his family did not wish to medicate him, he was never tested. Therefore he was not diagnosed, not medicated, and not receiving accommodations through disability services. He had earned an ACT composite score of 31 and graduated at the 52nd percentile in high school. David said that he felt he learned course material, but did not apply himself on assignments and said that this was the same in high school. Instead, throughout his college career, David spent considerable time playing video games, partying, and/or playing intramural sports. He also had financial concerns. His family discouraged him from taking out loans to pay for college and he admitted to selling drugs in order to earn money during his freshman year. He also admitted to being reluctant to seek help.

Fran is another good example of a student with compounding challenges. Fran was a first-generation and traditional-age student. She had financial concerns, but she and her family had not completed the FAFSA. Fran was working 30 hours per week between two different jobs (one of which was her family's business). This was not unusual for her, as she had worked nearly as many hours in high school and was able to earn Bs in most of her classes with little studying outside of class. Therefore, she was not in the habit of studying and lacked effective study strategies. Fran was enrolled in 16 credits during her first semester at UWSP. At orientation, the advisor did not give her any impression that 16 credits might be a heavy load, however neither she nor the advisor brought up whether she would be working or not. She was frustrated because she was doing poorly in a science course that she felt was irrelevant to her future career direction. She had wanted a different science course, but it was unavailable when she registered. She was also enrolled in an on-line course which she often forgot about as the semester went on. She

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neglected to get tutoring assistance because she assumed it was only offered at night, when her friends attended. However, she always worked at night. She did not drop the courses she was having difficulty in because she was concerned about losing health insurance coverage. When she failed two courses and earned a 1.17 GPA, she was placed on probation. She did not see her advisor in the first week of the semester as instructed, because he was the professor of one of the courses she failed. She was too embarrassed and did not know what she would say to him.

Like the three students above, each student interviewed experienced two or more of the following challenges: lack of academic success strategies; lack of meaningful advising experiences; institutional or instructional challenges, reluctance to seek help; lack of knowledge or use of support services; interference from disabilities; financial challenges; family, personal, or social issues; or extended absences. These compounding challenges impacted their academic performance. The students were often overwhelmed and unsure about how to best manage these issues.

Reactions to Being on Probation

While academic ability is critical for academic success, academic self-confidence is also an important factor for students to continue their pursuit of a college degree. Some students reported that while they were not proud of being on probation, they saw it coming and it was not a surprise. Some of these students had been marginal achievers in the past. However, for eight of the students interviewed, being placed on probation was an unsettling experience.

Greg said it was a "traumatic moment in his life" when he found out he was on probation. He questioned his abilities and his future:

I graduated from high school with like a 3.7 [GPA]. I didn't know I could get

down this low. I didn't feel—like I was that s—Am I really not that smart? I mean

here in college. It was extremely devastating. It's like, where do I go from here?

John said, "I was scared. I was afraid to tell my parents." Fran was "shocked" when she got the

notification and then "embarrassed." She only told her parents and her boyfriend. Nancy felt

"horrible." She said, "I wanted to cry. I didn't tell anybody."

Two students used the word depressing, but one actually described symptoms of

depression. Reflecting on when he first found out about being on probation, Ben said,

I was incredibly depressed. I would stay in my room for long periods of time. I

would not come out. I had no idea what my future was going to be like so I didn't

know what I was going to do. So—and I just went into some sort of state where I

just didn't want to do anything.

Ben wanted to continue in college and succeed, but said he was afraid he would not be

given the chance.

Robert was "scared" when he was first placed on probation. He was also afraid to

tell his parents and what it meant for his future. Once the shock and fear subsided, he felt

"embarrassed." He said, "…thinking that every teacher knows, it was stressful."

When asked to describe how they felt when they were placed on probation,

students used terms such as "traumatic moment," "devastating," "scared," "shocked,"

"embarrassed," "horrible," "wanted to cry," and "stressful." These students had feelings

of failure, inadequacy, and loss of self-confidence. They questioned their future and their

identity. Some even slipped into depression, isolating themselves for long periods of time.

In summary, what was striking about the twenty students interviewed was although they shared many of the same experiences and challenges; they had just as many differences as well. The majority of the students interviewed (17) were under-prepared for university-level academics and lacked academic success strategies. Their challenges in this area ranged from lack of study skills and habits and underestimating the level of detail needed to do well, to lack of time management, lack of motivation, and prioritizing other activities over studying. Also, a majority of students (13) felt that they did not have a meaningful, mentoring relationship with their faculty advisors and professors. Professors were perceived as intimidating and busy, but many students wanted and expected a deeper experience and more guidance. However, some students had connected with faculty and staff and felt supported at UWSP. Institutional and instructional challenges experienced by (13) students included a wide range of issues. Institutional challenges included lack of seat availability in courses, courses being perceived as irrelevant to their future, taking difficult combinations of courses simultaneously, and enrolling in courses well after their placement exam. Instructional challenges included having a limited number of evaluations within a course and poorly timed evaluations, a mismatch of content delivery or evaluation methods to learning style, and frustrations with on-line courses.

Nearly half (9) of the students interviewed described notable reluctance to seek help. For many, it was a deeply-ingrained sociocultural stigma, which conditioned them to be independent and to not ask for help. Others knew they were lost, but were unsure of whom to request assistance from or were unable to articulate what assistance they needed.

It is difficult to quantify the students who had lack of knowledge or use of support services. Each student was aware of at least one support service, but none of the students were aware of all services. Additionally, some students had used some services, but perhaps not to

their full extent. So quantifying this theme with a zero or 20 is not accurate and it is difficult to place a number on a student's degree of knowledge or use of the services. Similarly, it is somewhat difficult to quantify the students experiencing interference from diagnosed (and also possibly undiagnosed) disabilities including anxiety, learning disabilities, and ADD/ADHD. It can be said that four students had diagnosed disabilities and that three has suspected disabilities for a total of seven. However, if those students with suspected disabilities actually did not have a disability, then the number would be smaller.

Financial challenges were a great concern for six students. Many had not applied for financial aid and some lacked knowledge about the process, including priority deadlines for being awarded better aid such as grants. Some refused financial aid due to an aversion to accumulating debt. Financial pressures resulted in one student turning to prescription drugs in order to cope and another turned to selling marijuana in order to make money.

Family, personal, or social issues was a theme that was hard to quantify due to there being various degrees of challenges in this area and limits to interviews. Three interviews alluded to the fact that their family life was unhappy, but three explored this issue more in depth. These later students were trying to manage the divorce of their parents, had legal troubles, or had difficulty finding a comfortable social group.

Extended absences from classes were an issue for three students due to legal trouble or illness. While professors were understanding of extended absence circumstances and allowed the students to make up assignments and exams, students were not always provided the proper tools or time to do such well.

The students who participated in this study possessed distinct characteristics and experienced many of the above challenges simultaneously. While their characteristics,

experiences, and challenges might be similar, each student faced their own unique combination

or web of challenges.

Chapter Four: Analysis

The demographic investigation provided insight into a profile of students who have experienced academic difficulty at UWSP. Multiple characteristics were examined including gender, age, race, socio-economic status, first-generation college student status, high school percentile ranking, ACT scores, classification, semesters completed, original enrollment status, and residence hall occupancy. The interviews of 20 students on academic probation provided further insight into student characteristics, as well as student experiences and challenges at UWSP which may contribute to academic difficulty and lack of success.

Complex Web of Characteristics, Experiences, and Challenges

Students have various characteristics, experiences, and challenges which often interact with each other. It is important not to think of these issues as compartmentalized, but instead to recognize and identify how they interrelate and possibly act to compound or intensify the difficulties students face while at college.

The characteristics of students overrepresented on probation at UWSP included students who were male, below the 50th percentile rank in high school, early in their college career, racial or ethnic minorities, junior or lower class standing, first-generation college students, transfer students, eligible for Pell grants, non-traditional aged, and/or students with lower ACT composite scores.

During the interviews, students cited many issues that contributed to their academic difficulties. They most often cited under-preparedness/lacking academic success strategies as their biggest challenge, followed by institutional and instructional challenges and a lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences. Students were also reluctant to seek help from others including professors and support services, and they occasionally lacked awareness of the

full range of support services available. Additionally, students experienced interference from diagnosed or suspected disabilities, financial challenges, family or social challenges, and long-term absences.

Each student interviewed had multiple challenges and experiences that likely contributed to their lack of academic success. Issak, Graves, and Mayers (2006) found that students on academic probation identified more areas of difficulty than did students not on probation. As challenges compound, they may have an increasing impact on a student's academic success.

Gender and Reluctance to Seek Help

Carey (2008) found that a significant gender gap in college graduation rates exists, with females outpacing males. Nationally, the 6-year graduation rate for females is 60, compared to 54% for males. The Policy Analysis and Planning Office at UWSP verified that both 4-year and 6-year graduation rates are higher for females than for males. An analysis of the four most recent cohorts to graduate shows the average 6-year graduation rate to be 61% for females and 56% for males. This could mean that men may be more likely to drop out due to lack of academic success.

Student gender (rather than ability) was the most noteworthy characteristic of students on probation at UWSP. Of the 683 students on probation, 448 (65%) were males. When compared to ability, only 178 (26%) students (males and females combined) ranked below the 50th percentile in their high school class and were on academic probation. Males were twice as likely to be on probation as females, 10.8% of males were on probation compared to 5.3% of females. Recall that males made up only 48% of the student body, but 65% of the students on academic probation. In short, males were drastically overrepresented in the probationary population.

The analysis of the demographic data did not examine compounding demographic variables. For example, it is unknown whether the males currently experiencing difficulty were

also disproportionately low-achieving students in high school or disproportionately first-generation students, low income, or transfer students. However, the qualitative interviews did reveal something about male students experiencing difficulty.

The interviews revealed that male students were experiencing multiple challenges similar to female students such as lack of academic success strategies and other challenges. However, male students revealed very strong feelings about their reluctance to seek help. This is likely due to way males are socialized, at least in the United States. Many students mentioned their upbringing in this context. Lack of help-seeking behavior among males is thought to be a product of learned gendered attitudes and behaviors that come from cultural norms and values about what it means to be male or female (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Seeking help, relying on others, or admitting a need for help can conflict with the messages men receive about the importance of self-reliance, physical toughness, power, and control (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Wright, 2003). Wright (2003) citing sociolinguist, Deborah Tannen, states that:

> Males are less likely to ask questions in a public setting, where doing so will reveal their lack of knowledge. . . . In most cases a man engages the world as an individual in a hierarchical social order in which he is either one-up or one-down. . . . [Women are] more focused on connection rather than independence and self-reliance. . . . Women approach the world as a network of connections . . . where they feel stronger if their community is strong (p. 66-67).

For these reasons, females are more comfortable in help-seeking situations. This was affirmed by students comments during the interviews conducted. It is also confirmed by the rate that students use tutoring at UWSP. Females account for 57% of the students requesting content-area tutoring and males for only 43%.

Even though students faced multiple challenges, including challenges with their coursework, they were often reluctant to seek help when failing. Males, more so than females, reported this. Students reported coming from small communities and being accustomed to small class sizes filled with familiar faces. They saw their teachers every day in high school and community college and said that instructors knew them well enough to personalize explanations of material. Compared to their prior experiences, larger class sizes at UWSP made asking questions in class intimidating. Participants feared looking stupid or being judged by unfamiliar classmates and professors.

Similar findings were discussed in a study about working-class students. Most of the men interviewed were from working-class families. Therefore, these findings are also applicable here. Rose (2010) found that there were sociocultural reasons that students were reluctant to seek help, stating that seeking out resources to help attain one's educational goals is a culturally-influenced, learned behavior that is foreign to many students. Working-class students were reluctant to ask questions in class for fear of calling attention to themselves, appearing stupid, and feeling out of place.

Moreover, most university courses do not meet every day. As a result, many college professors were viewed as unapproachable because they remained unfamiliar for much longer and were more difficult to interact with when so many other students were present. Many students commented that professors appeared busy and spent little one-on-one time with students during advising sessions and office hours. This served to further intensify the reluctance to seek help on the part of unassuming students who were still learning social norms of the university and adjusting to them. Therefore, when challenged by course material and perhaps also being

underprepared and lacking academic success strategies, the college classroom, or a busy professor's office, was an intimidating setting in which to ask questions or seek guidance.

Regardless of the challenges students faced, such as lacking study skills and habits, taking a difficult combinations of courses, interference from disabilities, financial challenges, personal issues, and more, males were less likely to seek assistance voluntarily. Instead, many of the male students interviewed attempted to cope with their situation on their own and hoped for the best. The interviews revealed that the thought of asking for help made these (again, mostly male) students feel embarrassed, inadequate, judged, stigmatized, and like less of a person than others who did not seek help. With such strong comments, especially from male students about reluctance to ask for help, it is not surprising that males were greatly overrepresented as being on probation.

However, the participants volunteered to be part of this study. After being approached, students willingly shared deep personal feelings and experiences in less than an hour, some in the first few minutes of the interview. Perhaps it was because they were assured confidentiality, that it was so easy to divulge the details and challenges of their lives. Perhaps they secretly desired to do so, or perhaps both. When asked why he decided to participate in the study, one student said that he "[supposed he] was kind of looking for an outlet to process what [he] was going through." Without exception, each of the students interviewed thanked the researcher at the end of the interview and some said it had been helpful to them. However, it was only female participants (two) who followed up with e-mails to the researcher as they continued to think about their interview and as they had additional, related experiences throughout the rest of the semester. Despite being reluctant to seek assistance and ask for help, the study participants (even the males) appeared to crave a means to sort out and handle their challenges and experiences. Perhaps rather

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than reaching out for guidance, students (especially male students) were hoping for guidance to reach out to them. And, indeed, this is precisely what happened with this study.

This helps to answer the research questions. Question one asked how students made sense of their educational and social experiences. Students were not comfortable in their new educational setting, full of unfamiliar peers and professors. They believed that their lack of knowledge about course material would leave them vulnerable to being judged by others. Question two asked how students were navigating their probationary experiences. Students were unwilling to ask questions in class and often did not take active steps to seek out the variety of resources available such as professors, advisors, counselors, tutors, or career advisors. Male students were particularly less likely to seek out additional resources to help them back on track towards academic success.

Prior Academic Achievement vs. Under-preparedness/Lacking Academic Success Strategies

Studies have shown that students of high ability are most likely to persist in higher education and graduate with a degree. The demographic examination revealed that after the characteristic of being male, the next most common characteristic of students experiencing academic difficulty at UWSP was ability or prior academic achievement. This was defined by high school percentile ranking and ACT scores, although the latter was less predictive of academic difficulty.

An inverse relationship existed between high school percentile ranking and rate of academic probation. As high school percentile ranking decreased, academic probation rate increase. .Therefore, as expected (and reflecting the national trend) students with prior academic success were finding greater success with university-level academics and those with less prior success were having more difficulty in college.

Composite ACT score was also a predictor of potential academic difficulty. The lower the student's ACT score, the more likely they were to be on academic probation. Students with an ACT score of 21 or below were more likely to be on probation than students scoring above this level.

In addition to the demographic results, the participant interviews also showed that academic ability (broadly construed) was an important issue. Seventeen of the 20 students interviewed mentioned challenges with one or more aspects of being underprepared for college or lacking academic success strategies. Recall that this theme included lack of study skills or habits, lack of independent learning experiences, underestimating the level of detail they would be responsible for learning, underestimating the time needed to do well, lack of motivation, and prioritizing other activities over school work. For these 17 students, prior educational experiences had not fully prepared them for what was necessary to be successful in university-level coursework.

Students with high and low high school rank admitted to under-preparedness challenges. However, lower-ranking students usually mentioned multiple aspects of lacking academic success strategies, whereas high-ranking students mentioned fewer. With or without well-developed academic success strategies, even students with high ACT scores and ranking above the 50th percentile of their high school class, still found themselves on academic probation due to reasons other than, or in addition to lack of academic strategies. Therefore, a simple solution such as implementing a study skills course for probationary students (while certainly helpful) will not solve the academic difficulties of all students. The other reasons for lack of academic success also need to be considered and addressed.

This helps to answer research question one regarding how students made sense of their educational experiences. Most students interviewed reported that lack of academic success strategies played a role in their academic difficulties. Students with previously low achievement reported more aspects of lacking success strategies more than higher ranking students.

Institutional and Instructional Challenges

One reason students withdraw from college is because they fail to identify with or integrate into the academic culture of the campus (Tinto, 1993). Positive interactions with the formal and informal academic systems of the institution lead to greater integration and persistence. Institutional and instructional challenges can contribute to such lack of integration. In this study, institutional challenges included lack of seat availability in courses, perceived relevance of courses to the student's future, taking multiple historically-difficult courses simultaneously, and enrolling in courses well after their placement exam. Instructional challenges included having a limited number of evaluations within a course, a mismatch of content delivery or evaluation methods to learning style, and frustrations with on-line courses.

Institutional or instructional challenges were a challenge for 13 participants, but were especially cited by previously high-achieving students as the primary cause of their difficulties. Students were frustrated by the inability to register for courses they desired and that they thought were appropriate for their future educational or career goals. Students found it difficult to motivate themselves for courses in which they had little interest and felt they got stuck in.

Students who were taking multiple historically-difficult courses during the same semester had difficulty as well. Historically-difficult courses are courses with high levels of D, F, and W (withdraw) grades. Karen, who ranked at the 92nd percentile in high school was taking courses in genetics, physics, and organic chemistry simultaneously, which were all historically-difficult

courses. Penny, who ranked at the 91st percentile, was taking chemistry, calculus, and ecology together. Again, all were historically-difficult courses. Both students had courses in addition to these historically-difficult courses to make up their full course load. These students were very high achievers and were struggling with their courses. Some students also took courses, such as mathematics, well after their placement test, some as many as 18 months later. As a result, their skills had declined and they were at a disadvantage when attempting to learn the material.

Instructional challenges were also present. Students were challenged with delivery styles (such as lectures with numerous detailed PowerPoint slides or on-line courses) or assessment styles (such as multiple-choice tests) that they felt did not match their learning style or academic strengths. Additionally, some students were faced with limited assessment opportunities or poorly-timed assessments (too few before the drop date) that did not provide them with a sufficient amount of feedback necessary for academic growth and development throughout the semester.

On the surface, students who complain about instructional issues can appear to simply have an external locus of control, blaming the instructor rather than their own inability or other shortcomings. But that was certainly not the case. What these students were actually saying is that they desired richer learning experiences which were more engaging and different ways to demonstrate the knowledge they had gained. For example, some said that they would rather write essay exams than take multiple-choice tests and they would rather take their quizzes in class than on-line (where they could actually cheat if they desired to). Even previously high-achieving students pointed to these instructional issues as challenges for them, but they were especially challenging for previously lower-achieving students.

Discovering why such instructional challenges exist was beyond the scope of this study. However, if UWSP is losing capable students because of these challenges it may point to the need for a realignment of institutional values and perhaps professional development of faculty regarding student development, pedagogies, and assessment practices. Astin (1997) states that public universities often place increasing emphasis on research, in order to gain prestige and notoriety, but frequently they do so at the expense of a student-orientation that prioritizes effective undergraduate teaching. It is suggested that institutions prioritize undergraduate teaching and learning and that they promote and reward faculty members who engage in professional development regarding student learning and development, and that this should be a priority throughout one's career (Astin, 1997; Fink, 2003; Tinto, 2004).

Within the web of challenges that the students interviewed faced, institutional and instructional challenges was the second most common issue mentioned by students (tied with lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences). Students could benefit greatly from enhancements to instructional practices and addressing institutional issues.

Lack of Meaningful Advising and Mentoring Experiences

It is well known that advising is a critical component of higher education retention efforts (Allen & Smith, 2008; Astin, 1997; Engle & O'Brien, 2007). However, students are often dissatisfied with the advising they receive and according to national surveys, advising is often rated lowest in student satisfaction (Allen & Smith, 2008). Thirteen of the 20 students interviewed found their faculty advising sessions to be lacking in depth and guidance. Students said faculty advisors did not take time to get to know them personally or to customize advising sessions. Instead, faculty advisors were often seen as unapproachable "schedule-checkers" who rarely offered guidance about: co-curricular activities; courses outside the major; the difficulty

level of courses; the teaching or evaluation methods of other professors; or how to be successful in various courses.

It is possible that faculty did not see providing students with this type of information as part of their advising role or that they did not know these details. Allen and Smith's (2008) study showed that faculty advisors were most satisfied with and felt most responsible for assisting students with connecting their academic, career, and life goals and helping them to select courses within the major to do so. Faculty advisors felt least responsible for and were least satisfied with helping students to select general education courses that fit their interests, providing non-academic referrals, connecting students to co-curricular activities, and helping students with how things work at the university (timelines, policies and procedures with regard to registration, financial aid, grading, graduation, appeals, etc.). However, the same study showed that both students and faculty held these latter issues to be very important. Therefore, the study concluded that faculty may not believe that they can be responsible for every aspect of a student's advising needs and that universities should consider models that provide advising collaboration between student affairs professions and faculty. UWSP faculty advisors were not surveyed as to their opinions about the advising they provide. This is potentially an area for future research or examination.

The students interviewed who expressed dissatisfaction with advising desired more one-on-one time that was more meaningful, personalized, and offered direction about co-curricular activities and about how to be successful in a variety of courses. Students were reluctant to visit their faculty advisor if they had failed the advisor's class and some were reluctant to switch advisors even though they were dissatisfied with the advising they received. However, students who were advised by full-time academic staff advisors said they thought they got good advice

from caring individuals. Perhaps academic staff advisors feel more responsible for the other issues that students expressed a need for such as referrals to resources, and connections to co-curricular activities. This might call for a collaborative advising situation between student affairs personnel and faculty advisors. Because advising plays such an important role in student retention, UWSP students could benefit if the institution implemented changes to the current advising system.

Students of Color

The literature regarding student retention shows that minorities earn college degrees at lower rates than non-minorities. Studies also show that minority students often face challenges such as lack of academic preparation, financial difficulties, and sociocultural adjustments to college that put them at greater risk of experiencing academic difficulty. The demographic results revealed that racial and ethnic minority groups were overrepresented as being on probation at UWSP.

In this study, international and American students of color made up 8% of the student body and 16% of the students on probation. Therefore, racial or ethnic minority status could be used as an indicator to predict a higher potential for academic difficulty at UWSP. Unfortunately, only three minority students responded to the request for study participants and an interview was able to be arranged with only one of them. Therefore, conclusions cannot be drawn from one interview about any particular difficulties that minority students, in general, at UWSP may be facing. However, the low response rate of minority students to the call for study participants might indicate reluctance to seek help or an unwillingness to take active steps to voluntarily discuss their challenges.

A more in-depth analysis regarding minority students might reveal if the challenges faced by minority students nationally exist at UWSP as well. With the low participation rate of minority students in this study, possible reluctance to voluntarily seek help should be considered a relevant factor at UWSP as well.

Freshmen Facing a Web of Challenges

Students early in their college career are more likely to face academic difficulty because adjusting to a new academic and social community it is a major transition that some do not adapt to well. At UWSP, students early in their college career were also more likely to be on academic probation. Students who had attempted three or fewer semester made up 30% of the student body and 41% of those on probation. Cohorts early in their college career had higher rates of probation than those later in their college career. Completion of three of fewer terms could be used as a predictor of academic difficulty as these students differed statistically from those who had completed above three terms. While freshmen, sophomores, and juniors were overrepresented when compared to senior students, there was a slightly greater percentage of the freshman cohort on probation than the other classes. Freshman students made up 19% of the student body and 27% of those on probation.

Similar to minority students, there was a fairly low response from freshman students to the call for study participants. Only eight freshmen students responded and while every effort was made to include these freshmen, only three interviews were able to be arranged and completed. This low response and follow-through rate might be due to the lack of familiarity about being a participant in such a study. However, it could also be that freshman students are reluctant to discuss their lack of success and related challenges. For many students who come from small towns and educational settings with familiar faces, UWSP is a big and impersonal

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institution. These freshmen students are attempting to find their place and fit in at the university and they may be reluctant to speak up when faced with academic failure.

Each of the three freshmen students interviewed did not return to UWSP for a second year. Crystal and John were both suspended, although at the time of her interview, Crystal had already decided that she would not return for a second year. Fran did not return even though she was academically eligible to return. Each of these three freshmen faced multiple challenges.

One of the three freshmen, John, was previously a high achiever in high school, but underestimated the level of detail and depth of knowledge he would be responsible for learning and lacked independent study skills and habits. He was enrolled in courses that were uninspiring because other courses that he perceived to be more relevant and interesting were unavailable. He was intimidated by large class sizes compared to his small high school and therefore did not ask questions in class. In addition to this, he presented some key signs of having ADHD, which may be why he prioritized intramural sports, video games, and social activities over school work. However, he was neither diagnosed nor under treatment for ADHD. With such large class enrollment, it would be unlikely if any of John's professors had the chance to get to know him and recommend ADHD testing. It was only something that became evident to the researcher in the process of a 35-minute, one-on-one interview. John did not return to UWSP for a second year.

Crystal had a similar complex set of challenges. She was enrolled in courses which did not interest her, often forgot about her on-line course, and suspected that she may have ADD because it ran in her family. She lacked study habits and skills, prioritized student group activities over studying, and had concerns over finances when both she and her mother lost their jobs. She reported sleeping more than usual because she felt depressed and had turned to occasional use of Adderall to give her more energy. Crystal never met with her advisor after

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being placed on probation. She and her hall director attempted to set a meeting time, but that effort eventually failed and they never met. Nobody else, except the invitation to participate in this study, reached out to her about her probationary status and experiences. Crystal decided that college was currently not for her and she did not return to UWSP for a second year.

Fran also had a complex set of circumstances. She had financial concerns, but had never applied for financial aid. Therefore, she was working 30 hours per week, but did not discuss her employment plan with her registration advisor and ended up taking a heavy load of 16 credits. She felt that she lacked appropriate study skills and habits to be successful in college. She often forgot about her on-line course. She thought that her on-line course and that UWSP, in general, was impersonal. To make matters worse, her advisor was the professor for the class she failed so she was uncomfortable visiting him after being placed on probation. Fran did not return to UWSP for a second year.

Each of these freshmen students had a complex web of circumstances and challenges that they faced. Such complexity and intricacy is difficult to deal with on a large-scale basis and would never be fully satisfied with a one-dimensional approach such as a study-skills course (although that would have helped somewhat). Even a First Year Seminar is unlikely to fully address the many unique challenges faced by students in academic jeopardy. This has implications for how UWSP, and perhaps other universities, might address student challenges in a multi-faceted way in order to increase student success and retention.

Transfer Students: Facing a Web of Challenges and High Need for Quality Advising

Transfer students are considered to be a population of students in transition and at risk of experiencing academic difficulty as they adjust to their new social and educational setting. According to the demographic analysis, transfer students at UWSP were more likely to be on

academic probation than students who entered as new or returning students. Transfer students made up 27% of the student body and represented 33% of students on academic probation. Nearly 10% of transfer students were on probation compared to only 7.2% of students who had entered UWSP as new. Therefore, being a transfer student could be used as an indicator to predict a higher potential for academic difficulty.

The interviews revealed that transfer students face a complex web of challenges. Many reported that their community college had not prepared them for the rigors of university-level studies. Transfer students reported under-preparedness and lacked academic success strategies. This is a significant concern for this population because they often transfer to a university as juniors, when their coursework tends to increase in difficulty. Additionally, transfer students faced many similar challenges as other students such as institutional and instructional challenges, interference from disabilities, financial challenges, and more.

Quality advising could be pivotal in addressing these multiple issues. Most transfer students enter UWSP having declared a major. Subsequently, they are advised by faculty advisors, whereas in their community or technical colleges, they were advised by full-time academic staff members. These full-time staff advisors at community and technical colleges provided students with information about the teaching style and evaluation methods of instructors and helped them select courses that would match their interests, strengths, and learning preferences. In contrast to this, UWSP faculty advisors were seen as "schedule-checkers" rather than caring sources of guidance and support when planning a course of study or navigating the university system. Recall Karen, who returned to her community college advisor who then helped her to navigate the UWSP system by encouraging her to contact departments and get on waiting lists for courses she desired, but were full when she registered. Karen was disappointed

with her advising experiences (as well as other experiences) at UWSP and did not return for a second year.

Despite their advanced classification, transfer students are students in transition, much like freshmen students at college. They are new to the policies and practices of the institution and have less-advanced social networks from which to learn the "ins and outs" of how to be successful in their new educational setting. Therefore, quality advising experiences are critical for their academic and social integration and for fostering their development and success. Unfortunately, quality advising and mentoring experiences on the part of faculty advisors were often lacking at UWSP. Lack of quality advising was a common theme reported by transfer students which could impact their time to degree and retention.

Socio-economic Status and the Need for Financial Aid Education

Lower-income students are less likely to enroll in and to graduate from college than higher income students. Low income students more often have difficulty adapting to the social and academic culture because often they are less prepared for college because they have taken a less rigorous high school curriculum, have lower college entrance exam scores, and may work or live at home in order to ease the financial burden of college (Engle & O'Brien, 2007).

When considering socio-economic status, students at UWSP who were eligible for a Pell Grant were more likely to be on academic probation. Eligible students made up 29% of the student body and 35% of those on academic probation. A total of 9.6% of Pell-eligible students were on probation compared to 7.2% of those who were ineligible. Therefore, being eligible for a Pell Grant could be used as an indicator to predict a higher potential for academic difficulty. Six students of the 20 interviewed, were eligible for Pell Grants. Like many of the other students, their challenges were many, including under-preparedness and lack of academic success

strategies, lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences, reluctance to seek help, personal challenges, interference from disabilities, and more. Only two of the six Pell Grant recipients interviewed expressed financial concerns and none of them were working an unreasonable amount of hours. Therefore, their financial aid appeared to be a benefit to these students.

The socio-economic status of some students was unknown because they had not applied for financial aid. Some of these students actually disclosed considerable stress over financial matters and they were from mostly working-class families. Many students lacked information (or had misinformation) about the financial aid application process, especially about priority deadlines which could influence the type of aid they receive. Therefore, education about financial aid and perhaps financial matters in general, may be in order for a greater number of students. This also has potential implications for identifying the socio-economic status of students as well as for communicating with students experiencing academic difficulty. If the university can assist with reducing the number of challenges students face (both academic and non-academic), students will be more likely to persist at the institution.

This helps to answer research question one regarding how students made sense of their academic and social experiences. Some students were stressed about financial matters and some chose to work to earn money for college. Research question two asked how students were navigating the probationary experience. Students often made assumptions about their eligibility for financial aid and failed to pursue further knowledge about the financial aid process.

Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students tend to be highly motivated and achievement oriented, but may face developmental needs and stressors different than traditional age students which make their

transition to college difficult (Benshoff, 1993). At UWSP, nontraditional students were overrepresented as being on probation. They made up 13% of the student body and made up 17% of those on academic probation. A total of 10.4% of non-traditional students were on probation compared to only 7.5% of traditional age students, which was significant according to the chi-square test. Therefore, being over the age of the 24 could be used as a predictor of having a higher potential for academic difficulty.

The three nontraditional students interviewed were also experiencing a number of different challenges, only some of which had to do with academics. One student, Matt, missed three weeks of classes due to legal trouble. He was not provided enough time, nor the appropriate tools to complete the work he missed. Matt also had serious money concerns as he attempted to support a family without stable employment. Sara was challenged by instructional and evaluation techniques which she felt did not match her strengths. Andy lacked academic success strategies and faced infrequent evaluation methods which did not allow him to develop academically. Neither Sara nor Andy felt they had good mentoring relationship with their advisor. Andy was actually intimidated by his advisor due to the faculty member's cold classroom demeanor and because he had previously failed the professor's class. Each of the three nontraditional students did not have a significant social network at UWSP.

While nontraditional students are older, and thought to be more mature, their classroom challenges can be similar to traditional students. The students interviewed reported that they, too, struggled with academic success strategies such as time management and motivation, and were challenged by course delivery and evaluation methods which did not match their strengths or learning preferences. Over seven years of working in the campus tutoring center, the researcher has heard from nontraditional students that their age difference sets them apart from their

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classmates and that they feel isolated at times. Also, because they often live off campus, their

social networks are often less-developed than traditional students. Nontraditional students may

also have significant challenges outside of college such as legal and financial difficulties or

challenges with their children or spouse which could impact their classroom performance and,

subsequently, their time to degree or retention (Benshoff, 1993). This makes quality advising and

mentoring experiences important for their success as well as for their dedication to earning a

degree at the institution. Yet, such quality advising experiences with faculty advisors were

lacking at UWSP.

Living Off-campus and the Need for Quality Advising

Students living off campus were only slightly more likely to be on academic probation

than students living in a residence hall. Students living off campus made up 64% of the student

body and 66% of those on probation, a difference of only 2 percentage points which was not

statistically significant. Therefore, on or off campus residency should not be used as a predictor

for academic difficulty. This characteristic was explored because UWSP is believed to have a

strong residence hall staff that mentors students experiencing academic difficulty. Whether the

support of residence hall staff has an impact or not was beyond the scope of this study. However,

residence halls can only accommodate one-third of the student body. The majority of students

must live off campus and this means that the majority of students on probation (448 students out

of 683) must live off campus, without the addition support that may be provided by residence

hall staff. Future research could include whether residence hall occupancy or living off-campus

correlates to retention at UWSP. However, the preliminary results of this study show that living

on or off campus does not correlate to academic difficulty.

For the most part, students who lived off-campus were declared majors, who are then advised by faculty advisors. As previously reported, faculty advising practices often lacked quality and depth at UWSP. Therefore, students experiencing academic difficulty who live off campus may not be receiving sufficient guidance and support to help them navigate their complex web of challenges. This may have implications for their time to degree and persistence at the institution.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students often face difficulties in higher education because their family background sets them up as true beginners in the academic culture of college (Giblin, 2004). First-generation college students were more likely to be on academic probation at UWSP. UWSP only recently began collecting first-generation student status. Therefore, it was only known that 15% of students were first-generation, but they made up 22% of the students on academic probation. A total of 11.4% of first-generation students were on probation compared to only 9% of those who were not first-generation. Therefore, being a first-generation college student could be used as a predictor of having a higher potential for academic difficulty. Of the 20 students interviewed, 11 were first-generation college students.

Each of the first-generation college students interviewed experienced a web of challenges, similar to the students who were not first-generation college students. They were under-prepared and lacked academic success strategies, had interference from disabilities, were dealing with family and social issues, lacked knowledge of support services, lacked quality mentoring experiences with advisors, and more. No particular challenge or theme from the interviews stood out for first-generation college students.

Because of the vast web of challenges first-generation college students faced, paired with the fact that their families may be of little guidance to them, these students could likely benefit from more in-depth quality advising. Some themes that emerged from the student interviews were not prominently associated with students of any specific demographic category. Nevertheless, these themes are important and will be discussed more completely in what follows.

Knowledge and Use of Support Services

A considerable amount of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of programs that provide support such as tutoring, mentoring, career and personal counseling, and development education and this especially true for under-prepared, low-income, first-generation and disabled students (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). In this study, students varied in their knowledge and use of such support services. Some students were reluctant to use services, while others were unaware or unclear about the extent of services provided. Yet others had used services and were happy with the assistance they received.

The students who were reluctant to use support services discussed an assumed social stigma. These students were afraid of being judged as incompetent or inferior. A sociocultural value of independence and self-reliance held them back from seeking assistance when they could have likely benefitted from it. This was discussed more thoroughly in the section on reluctant males above. This may have implications for UWSP communicates with students regarding the use of support services.

Some students were simply unaware of services available at UWSP. They assumed (correctly) that support services were discussed at orientation. However, months later when they actually needed help, they could not recall details. This may be because they never anticipated that support services would be needed by them and therefore mentally disposed of the

information. This happened when students received e-mails about services as well. If there was not an immediate need, the information was simply disregarded. Most of the students interviewed reported achieving average or higher grades in high school. They did not anticipate struggling in college, perhaps because they had never struggled before. When overloaded with information during orientation, students seem to prioritize what is most relevant to them at the time. If the student never needed outside support in the past, they may assume they will not need it in college as well. If a student had never received special assistance, it may not have occurred to them to be on the lookout for it. Therefore, information about support services may not be easy for students to retain.

Some students were unclear about the extent of the support services provided or how services were delivered. Two students assumed that they needed to have a final draft of a paper before coming to the writing center and that they would be required to drop off the draft and pick it up later. Actually, writing tutors assist students in person, at any stage of the writing process. Papers are not allowed to be dropped off. One student thought that all tutoring happened at night because that was when her friends went. Yet, tutoring occurs throughout the day. So, there seems to be a lack of communication or at least a lack of understanding about when and how services are delivered and available, despite efforts on the part of support office to specify these details in their communication. Additionally, social networks play a critical role in student's knowledge acquisition and sometimes a student's peer group is misinformed or lacks information.

Several students had used support services at UWSP. While some who had used tutoring, reported starting too late to have an impact on their situation, others spoke very highly about how much they gained from the personalized attention either during the semester they were placed on probation or since. It helped to put the student more at ease by offering guidance and reassurance.

The career center had helped students to better prepare for their future by encouraging them to get involved in co-curricular activities in order to supplement their résumé. This type of involvement would likely have an impact on developing their social network as well.

Some students were reluctant to use services because of a fear of being judged. Others simply dismissed information when it was not immediately needed. Yet others had misinformation about when and how services were delivered which impacted their use of the services. Students who had used services, reported being very happy with and reassured by the assistance provided. Use of support services could help to foster the social and academic integration of students.

Interference from Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities have difficulty processing and retrieving information which can cause difficulties in college. Interference from disabilities crossed demographic boundaries among the students interviewed. Four students had been diagnosed with disabilities including one with anxiety, one with a prior diagnosis of a learning disability, and two who had been diagnosed with ADHD. Three others were suspected of having ADD or ADHD. Students with disabilities often struggle to find success in college.

The students with ADD/ADHD had difficulty focusing on schoolwork or performing tasks that required concentration, such as studying and taking exams. They found it difficult to focus on material that was of little interest to them. However, they could hyper-focus on subjects or activities that captured their attention. These students tended to prioritize other activities over schoolwork. The student with an anxiety disorder found his condition was exacerbated when he experienced academic stress and had feelings of inadequacy and depression when he did not succeed.

Interesting, of all the students interviewed who had a diagnosed disability, none were registered with the disability services office. Therefore, none of them were receiving accommodations such as getting extra time to take exams or being able to take exams in a distraction-free environment. Additionally, none of them were taking medication for their condition. These students did not want to be different than other students, perhaps like they felt in high school. The desire to be like everybody else causes them to forgo medication which could help them to be successful in college.

Some students do not fully understand their disability and its potential impact on their academic career. Since they were often diagnosed as children, they may not have been able to fully comprehend their disability at the time of their diagnosis and never learned how it might impact their adult life. Hayden admitted to not understanding how the ADHD brain functions compared to a non-ADHD brain. He was very interested in learning more once the idea had been raised during his interview. Perhaps with a better understanding of how his brain processes information, he might be willing to take Adderall again and see if it has an effect on his ability to study. He had, after all, taken Adderall in high school and graduated in the 69th percentile.

While many students at UWSP are registered with disability services, throughout the years the researcher has encountered many who go without medication and special accommodations. Additionally, there are many other students who likely have a disability such as ADD/ADHD, but because of family or personal preferences including fear of medications or fear of being labeled, the students go undiagnosed and untreated. Subsequently, their potential for success in college is decreased. These students face a considerable challenge in college when going undiagnosed or forgoing treatment for their condition. Appropriate interventions to address this issue might assist these students in their quest for success in college.

Family, Personal, and Social Challenges

Students experiencing family, personal, or social challenges can have difficulties maintaining focus on academics. Students with various demographic characteristics experienced family, personal, or social challenges. Some students were trying to escape what they generally described as "difficult" or "troubled" family lives. Others were experiencing more immediate crises such as parents divorcing, death in the family, legal trouble, financial pressures, or lacking a comfortable social group. These more immediate issues entered the daily thoughts of the students. These issues consumed their attention and time and impacted their ability to be at their best academically.

Half of the students who discussed family, personal, and social challenges were also reluctant to voluntarily seek help. Linda, whose parents were divorcing, was the only student who had visited the counseling center, but had attended only once. One student, Karen, had difficulty finding a social group that she identified with. Of all the students interviewed, she seemed to be most unhappy, and could have benefitted from visiting the counseling center. Karen was also struggling with her courses which included three historically difficult courses and also had not formed a relationship with her advisor. All of the students with family, personal, and social challenges were also experiencing a variety of other challenges such as lacking academic success strategies, financial pressures, lack of awareness of support services, interference from disabilities, extended absences, or lacking quality advising experiences.

While some students were trying to escape family life, others were being drawn back to it because they felt their family needed them or because of their lack of connection to other students or connection to the university in general. Some of these students seemed somewhat isolated. Being able to process their challenges with an understanding and caring individual at

UWSP would likely be beneficial to them as it would enhance their social integration and improve their academic success.

Extended Absences

Extended absences from course material and delivery can complicate a student's success and raises questions as to how flexible a university or professor can be to accommodate a student's challenges. Three students had experienced extended absences--two because of illness and one because he was in jail. Fortunately, professors were understanding and allowed students who experienced these absences to make up the work they missed without a grade penalty. However, despite this flexibility provided by the professor, sufficient time and tools were not available to assist the students with doing their best work with the missed material.

The two students who were ill with the H1N1 virus were not disabled, and therefore they were not legally qualified for accommodations. Some may find it difficult to have sympathy for a student who was in jail for three weeks, perhaps especially one who had previously served a prison sentence. However, this student had paid his debt to society according to the legal system. He ended up in jail on a temporary probation hold because of a couple bounced checks. Most other individuals would have only incurred a finance charge from their bank.

The issue of extended absences raises many tough questions. While the students reported that professors seemed understanding of their circumstances, it was still difficult to complete the course requirements given the time and tools they were provided. It was beyond the scope of this study to research this issue more thoroughly. However, the issue raises many questions. Are there guidelines for such circumstances? If so, who knows about them? How much flexibility should a professor provide? What type of tools should the student have access to in such circumstances? Perhaps video-taped lectures, tutoring, or note-takers would be helpful. Whose

responsibility is it to provide students with such tools and at whose cost? Would providing these things cause a snowball effect of students faking illness and being allowed extra time or additional help? Should the student be allowed to request a late withdraw from courses based on these special circumstances? If so, whose responsibility would it be to inform them that such a possibility even exists? The professor is the most likely one to know that a student is in such a predicament. Is it reasonable to expect faculty to be aware of the various options that might be available to students in such circumstances? Is this a faculty member's job? While three weeks of a 15-week semester is a significant amount of class time to miss, is it so much that the student should be penalized by having to repeat the entire semester? What is the true cost of this in student attachment to the university? These are just some of the questions that this issues raises.

Aiding students with managing extended absences is a complex issue. It is also an issue that could be on the rise as illnesses become more severe and as personal or family issues may take students away from campus. Consider, for example, the student whose sibling, parent, spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend is killed in the Iraq war. An institution should discuss the difficult questions above and consider the costs, benefits, and moral obligations to students who find themselves facing such challenges.

Compounding Challenges

Each of the students interviewed were experiencing a variety of the challenges or themes described earlier: under-preparedness and lacking academic success strategies; lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences; institutional and instructional challenges; reluctance to voluntarily seek help; lack of knowledge about support services; interference from disabilities; financial challenges; family, personal, or social issues; or extended absences. The majority of the students were reluctant to seek help voluntarily about the challenges they were

facing. Sometimes this was because they did not know where to go, but often they felt their issues were too personal or they felt they might be judged for not being independent or not fitting in. Any one of these issues was enough to frustrate the students, but when experienced in combination, they often overwhelmed the students. These multiple challenges impact their success rate and their self-esteem. This supported the research which indicates that college students experiencing academic difficulty identify multiple challenges that impact their learning and success.

The webs of multi-faceted challenges that students experience are difficult to address with the way typical support services are delivered on a university campus. When students visit the tutoring center, their immediate course challenges are addressed. Within a few minutes, they are assigned a tutor. While this may meet one of their needs, it takes more time, some trust-building, and perhaps privacy to uncover the many other additional challenges that the student may be facing. It also takes someone knowledgeable enough about student issues and knowledgeable enough about university policy, procedures, and services in order to assist the student with these multiple issues. Universities must look beyond traditional, one-dimensional ways of handling student challenges because student challenges are often multi-dimensional. Universities should strive to develop better methods of identifying the entire unique web of issues a student is facing and respond accordingly in order to improve student success and retention.

Reactions to Being on Probation

Some students had striking reactions to being placed on probation. They described the experience as being a traumatic moment, being devastated, scared, shocked, embarrassed, horrible, stressful, and that they wanted to cry. These students had feelings

of failure and inadequacy. They questioned their identity and their future in college, as well as in life itself. Some even slipped into depression, isolating themselves from others for long periods of time.

For many of these students, this was their first major failure. It frightened them and they questioned their ability to succeed in college and in life. Some students work hard to overcome their challenges and bounce back from such a setback. But some decide that it is just too big of a risk to their self-esteem, pride, or checkbook to fail another semester and therefore may not try. Some, like Crystal, might assume that college must not be for them and drop out. Six of the 20 students interviewed did not return to UWSP or were suspended after the semester in which they were interviewed. In order to improve success and retention rates, universities need to address student needs before their challenges are so overwhelming that the student decides to leave college.

Summary of Analysis

The issues surrounding students experiencing academic difficulty are varied and complex. This study sought to expose those issues and challenges of the students at one institution of higher education.

Research question one asked how students at UWSP were making sense of their educational and social experiences. The interviews found that each student had a unique set of characteristics and that each was experiencing their own complex web of challenges. Some challenges were more often experienced by students with certain demographic characteristics, while other challenges were unpredictable as to who they would impact.

Students who had ranked below the 50th percentile in high school often expressed more aspects of being under-prepared for college-level academics and lacking academic success strategies such as: lacking study skills and habits; underestimating the level of detail, difficulty, depth, or extent of knowledge required to succeed; lack of motivation; poor time management practices; and prioritizing other activities over academics. Students ranking above the 50th percentile in high school also cited these challenges, but less often than lower-ranking students.

Higher-ranking students more often cited that their educational difficulties were caused by institutional and instructional issues such as: lack of course availability; enrollment in courses they thought were irrelevant to their career or academic goals; taking multiple historically-difficult courses simultaneously; enrolling in courses well after their placement exam; having a limited number of evaluations within a course; a mismatch of content delivery or evaluation methods to learning style; and frustrations with on-line courses. These institutional and instructional challenges were cited by lower-ranking students as well as higher-ranking.

Lack of academic success strategies and institutional and instructional challenges were the most common issues that students cited as causes of their academic difficulties. However, students cited a variety of other challenges that contributed to their academic difficulties as well. These challenges included: lack of knowledge about and use of the support services; interference from disabilities; financial challenges; family, personal, and social challenges; and extended absences.

Interestingly, some students actually did not cite some of these challenges as challenges but they were revealed during the interviews. For example, one student who

was diagnosed with ADHD blamed his lack of completing assignments on laziness rather than on his inability to concentrate. Two others who were unsure if they had ADHD said their lack of success was because they found some of their courses to be boring. These students were making sense of their academic experiences, citing lack of motivation or lack of interest in a course, but may not have been interpreting their experiences accurately.

The second part of research question one asked about how students were making sense of their social experiences. Most students were integrating socially quite well. However, three students did have issues in this area. One was having serious difficulty finding a social group whom she connected with and felt out of place at a more rural university than she was used to. She was very unhappy and chose to leave UWSP. The two other students were nontraditional students who did not have a social group on campus. They did not interpret their lack of a campus social group as a cause of difficulty. However, neither felt well-connected to their faculty advisor either.

Research questions two asked how students were navigating their probationary experiences. This question had varied responses. Some students had not visited their faculty advisor after being placed on probation either because they did not realize they were supposed to or because it was their advisor's class they failed and were therefore, too embarrassed to do so. Some students were confused about who to see for their probationary advising appointment because either their advisor changed due to their probationary status or because they had never seen a faculty advisor before, rather only a peer advisor. Many students thought that faculty advisors were unapproachable and that their appointments (probationary meetings or regular advising sessions) lacked depth.

Students said that advising appointments lasted only 5-7 minutes, were not personalized, and were basically meant for schedule-checking.

Some students had sought out other resources to navigate their probationary experiences. Some had sought out tutoring services to help with their coursework. These students found tutoring resources to be very helpful if they started attending early enough in the semester. Students had made other changes to help them succeed such as decreasing the hours they spent at a job and increasing the time they devoted to studying. However, many students were reluctant to voluntarily seek help. A strong sociocultural value of independence held these, especially male, students back from asking questions in class, visiting professors in their office, and even from making use of resources such as tutoring. These students were attempting to navigate their probationary experiences on their own.

In summary, students experiencing academic difficulty face a unique and complex web of challenges. Some challenges are experienced more often by students with certain demographic characteristics, while other challenges are unpredictable as to whom they will touch. The complex webs of challenges that students may face are often difficult to indentify without committing sufficient time dedicated to that very mission. Additionally, who (if anybody) is responsible for identifying and addressing student challenges is also a concern. If universities desire to improve their time to degree and student retention rates, they need to consider the unique characteristics of individual students, strive to reveal their complex webs of challenges, and attempt to address those challenges with creative solutions.

Chapter Five: Recommendations and Conclusion

Student achievement is closely tied to student retention. Each student experiencing academic difficulty has a distinct set of characteristics and faces a unique web of experiences and challenges that can impact their success in college. These experiences and challenges influence their academic and social integration into the university as well as their persistence at the institution. Tinto (1993) suggests that in order to improve retention rates, universities should focus on issues that they can have a direct impact upon. This chapter begins with strengths and limitations of the study, future research recommendations, and finally concludes with various recommendations which could have an impact on student success at UWSP.

Strengths and Limitations

Although the findings of this study add to the body of literature regarding the experiences and challenges of students experiencing academic difficulty, some limitations of the research should be noted. First, this study was conducted at a single public, four-year, mid-sized institution located in the Midwest. Therefore, the findings may not necessarily be generalized to other institutions such as community colleges, private institutions, or perhaps institutions located in other geographic areas. Second, the demographic examination that compared the general student body to the population of students on probation was only performed on data from one semester. Therefore, it is unclear whether the findings would hold up under a longitudinal study. Third, qualitative interviews were conducted with only 20 students who volunteered to participate. Why these particular students volunteered to participate is mostly unknown, therefore there may be some bias in their answers.

Future Research

Future research regarding probationary students at UWSP should involve a longitudinal demographic examination to determine whether overrepresented demographic characteristics hold up over time. Additionally, analyzing the disparity between males and females regarding academic difficulty and retention may yield additional insight about potential communication and organizational practices which could help all students persist at UWSP. Further analysis might also include how student success is impacted when students have multiple at-risk characteristics. Faculty should be surveyed to determine their beliefs about their advising role. Future research should also involve analysis of students who have left UWSP to determine their reasons for leaving.

Recommendations

UWSP has many programs and initiatives in place to address retention and student success efforts such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs, a strong residential life program, and other support services such as tutoring, advising, counseling, disability services, and career services. Additionally, other retention initiatives are under development such as a First Year Seminar. These programs and services should continue to be supported and in many cases expanded or enhanced in ways which will be described later in the chapter. What follows is a number of suggestions or recommendations for faculty and staff to consider in order to increase student success and retention at UWSP. Appendix B outlines the various suggestions and how they align to the themes that emerged from the student interviews. Four primary recommendations are offered for consideration. In addition to these four recommendations, it is also suggested that exit surveys or interviews are implemented when students drop out in order to ensure the campus remains aware of student retention needs.

The first recommendation is to assist students with the development of academic success strategies by continuing to support and expand courses with this goal, implementing an early warning system, and implementing various enhancements to a variety of support services in order to make them more accessible and more widely used by the entire student body. A second focus is to address institutional and instructional challenges by continuing enrollment management efforts, providing and publicizing the importance of professional development, and analyzing historically-difficulty courses for potential changes. A third recommendation is to improve advising and mentoring experiences through various means such as professional development of all faculty advisors, unit analysis of current advising outcomes for adjustments, or implementing a dual-advising system. Fourth, the campus should implement a mandatory probationary intervention program that addresses the web of challenges that students face and provides the counseling and mentoring to help students overcome the feeling of failure and loss of academic self-confidence. Further discussion of these suggestions is below. Because this study focused on one campus, the recommendations are specific to this campus. However, if an institution finds similarities in their student body, they might consider similar recommendations.

Assisting Students with the Development of Academic Success Strategies

Academic standards should not be lowered. However, it must be acknowledged that students enter college at various levels of academic preparation. The primary reason the students interviewed cited for their academic difficulties was lacking sufficient study skills and habits or being generally under-prepared for college-level academic study. Therefore, efforts to encourage the acquisition of academic success strategies is critical to prevent academic failure and the earlier the intervention, the more likely students will be to adapt to the academic culture of the institution.

Intrusive, proactive strategies must be used to reach freshmen before they have an opportunity to experience feelings of failure, disappointment, and confusion (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999). Students early in their college career are the most prone to dropping out. Therefore, the university should consider continuing and perhaps expanding courses which help students develop academic success skills. An early warning system could also be implemented to identify students who begin to experience academic difficulty, in order to connect them with appropriate support and development opportunities before they fail. Various support services could be enhanced, expanded, and made more accessible to the entire student body. Additional suggestions include possibly making semantic changes in how these services are communicated, making services free for all students, and relocating offices for greater visibility and increased referrals.

There are various courses already in place at UWSP which enhance students' academic success strategies and these courses could be expanded and promoted more thoroughly. One such course, Library Resources (LR 101), teaches students about how to use library resources efficiently and effectively. This skill is important in order for students to feel competent in their new and unfamiliar learning environment. Another course, Study Skills (Ed 105), teaches students academic success strategies such as time management, note-taking, textbook reading strategies, memory strategies, and more. Again, most of the students interviewed struggled with these important strategies. The learning outcomes of the First Year Seminar that is currently under development will address academic success strategies as well and this should remain a priority of this course. Currently, the enrollment for these three courses is very manageable (25, 15, and 20 students, respectively). This is advisable in order to create an environment where students feel connected to the professor and other students. Many of the students interviewed felt

this connection was lacking in their courses and especially lacked study skills and habits. Continued support and possible expansion of these courses, especially Study Skills, should be considered.

UWSP could implement an early warning system or retention management system which allows for early identification of students who are likely to experience difficulties or who could benefit from additional guidance. Such a system also allows for intervention, should students actually begin to experience academic difficulties. This web-based system manages information about each student which is either downloaded and/or submitted by the student into the system. It then identifies students who are at risk of experiencing academic difficulty based on personal characteristics, such as prior academic achievement or attitudinal or motivational issues. This allows university personnel to reach out and connect students to resources that could benefit them. The system also allows faculty to submit information such as mid-term grades or class attendance information about their students. The system then gives an official alert to the student regarding their academic progress and suggests appropriate resources such as visiting the professor or attending tutoring. Other university personnel such as advisors, residence hall staff, or coaches can also be allowed access to student information through the early warning system, allowing them the opportunity to communicate with students who are experiencing difficulty. These individuals can then help guide the student toward resources such as tutoring, advising, or study skills assistance. According to the national literature, campuses using early warning or retention management systems have had an impact on student success and retention and these systems are said to pay for themselves in retained students (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999).

Support services such as tutoring, academic literacies, counseling, career services, disability services, and advising can assist students in gaining academic success strategies and

help them to obtain the tools necessary to be successful in college. The Tutoring-Learning Center at UWSP maintains a well-trained peer tutoring staff of 150 peer tutors. Tutors assist students with the development of course content knowledge, computer literacy, as well as reading, writing, study skills, and test-taking advice. Additionally, the academic literacies position in the Tutoring-Learning Center could be used more creatively. This half-time professional staff position serves as a study skills specialist and assists students who are having difficulty adjusting to the college learning environment. Creative or purposeful use of this position might include, for example, requiring students who are conditionally-admitted to the university or probationary students to meet regularly with the Academic Literacies Specialist for study skills development. Tutoring and academic literacies services are a clear path to helping students acquire the skills necessary to be successful in college.

Because of the reluctance to seek help that several students described in their interviews, support services need to be reframed in order to be perceived as an integral part of college learning and as an expectation of use, rather than as a remediation for deficiency. In order to accomplish this, semantic changes, financial support, and organizational realignment are recommended.

First, programs and services such as counseling, advising, career services, disability services, and tutoring may need to be presented to students differently. Perhaps they could be presented as a positive, natural, and integral part of the college experience, rather than simply as a resource for when they are in trouble. It could be suggested that there is an expectation that all students should and will use these services. This goal could be accomplished in the way that individuals and departments communicate information about such services. For example, it is

fast and easy to say, "If you are struggling or need help with your coursework, visit the tutoring center." But it might be more effective to say, for example:

> Your university courses will be much more demanding than your high school or community college courses. Even students who were previously high-achievers are often surprised by the level of difficulty of their assignments and exams and the amount of time it takes to be successful. In college, students have less in-class time. Therefore, you are expected to visit your instructors outside of class and make use of additional resources such as study groups, tutors, and librarians in order to master course material and do well. These individuals are here to assist in your development into a successful college student.

Communication could be crafted in such a way as to reframe college learning experiences as different from high school learning in that it is collaborative and active. Similar communication may be necessary for other support services as well. Professional development may be necessary for faculty and staff regarding how to reframe support services as an integral part of college learning and as an expectation that students will use the services.

Second, in order to increase academic success strategies and further reduce reluctance on the part of students to seek help, all support services could be free for all students. Currently tutoring services for math, sciences, foreign languages, and accounting have a fee attached for most students. These services are free for minority students. They are also free for low-income students, first-generation, and disabled students if they are enrolled in the federally-funded Trio program, otherwise a fee reduction applies for these populations. While this might serve to encourage these at-risk populations to use tutoring, it may also communicate that these populations are different and subsequently that the services are primarily for those who are

different. Because students without at-risk characteristics also struggle academically, it is important to communicate that services that directly support the development of academic success strategies are for each student (regardless of their at-risk characteristics).

Lastly, to further increase the use of support services, organizational realignment and office relocation could be explored. Recall in the literature review that studies showed that when support offices were nearby each other, communication between offices improved and referrals of students increased. Students are more likely to follow through with a referral to another support office when a staff member can literally hand them off to another staff member (Bridges, 2008). Currently, nearly every support office at UWSP is located in a separate building. It is unlikely that many UWSP staff members have time to walk students across campus very often, nor might they wish to venture outdoors very often in what is often unpleasant, sub-freezing weather. This makes these in-person hand-offs infrequent. Additionally, most of the support offices at UWSP are located in out of the way locations, where students rarely pass by. Therefore, services must be actively sought out by students. A more prominent location of support offices would perhaps encourage greater use.

Addressing Institutional and Instructional Challenges

A prominent theme from the interviews was institutional and instructional challenges. This theme included: lack of course availability; enrollment in courses perceived as irrelevant to future career or educational goals; simultaneous enrollment in two or more historically-difficult courses; taking courses long after placement testing; having too few evaluations in a course to foster academic development/too little feedback before the drop date; mismatch of course delivery or evaluation methods to students learning styles and strengths; and challenges with on-line courses.

To address these issues, UWSP should continue its recent enrollment management efforts, enhance and provide professional development regarding advising practices, publicize the mission of the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE), encourage departments and faculty to analyze courses with high levels of D, F, and W grades, and implement an early warning system.

Regarding institutional challenges, recent enrollment management efforts to ensure seat availability in courses should continue to be a priority. This will allow students more options to select courses that fit best with their intended educational and career directions. Seat availability in mathematics and foreign language courses is especially important since a gap in the use of these skills often results in a loss of skill. Additionally, advising practices should be considered and professional development regarding advising should potentially be a priority. If advisors encouraged students to continue their education in the areas of mathematics and foreign languages, and discouraged taking time off, students would likely be more successful in these disciplines. Additionally, if for some reason it is unavoidable to take multiple historically-difficult courses simultaneously, students could be advised to seek appropriate support such as study groups or tutoring.

Regarding instructional challenges, Tinto (2004) states that "students who are actively involved with peers, faculty and staff—especially in learning activities—are more likely to learn, persist, and graduate" (p.11). He also states that higher education faculty typically are "not trained to teach their own students." Therefore, he recommends that institutions invest in faculty development in order for them to acquire a range of pedagogical skills to improve student learning. He also suggests that institutions reward effective teaching.

The Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE) is the professional development center for faculty at UWSP. While currently in its fifth year of existence, the office has never had a permanent director and its mission has not been publicly communicated to faculty as a priority. A new mission was recently approved by its advisory board and the faculty senate and a search for a permanent director is expected. When these two efforts are aligned, the timing may be ideal for the new mission to become a public priority of the administration. Efforts of this office could be a key to address the issue of instructional challenges experienced by students. CAESE could support new and existing faculty with pedagogical development and innovation such as implementing active learning strategies, high-impact teaching practices, and various assessment strategies. UWSP faculty members often refer to the institution as a teaching college. However, the campus' reputation as a research institution has been growing. UWSP has many excellent faculty members. However, students made many comments regarding challenges with instructional and assessment methods, how some faculty did not take time with students, and how some faculty seemed unapproachable. Therefore, it might be necessary for the campus to consider its values and priorities regarding teaching and research and to allocate resources to support each accordingly.

The CAESE office may also be a resource for departments undergoing curricular alignment activities and for analyzing historically-difficult courses. These courses with high numbers of students earning D, F, and W grades could be analyzed for how to improve student success within them. Considerations might include whether there is too much information being required in one course and perhaps splitting it into a series of two courses, whether the teaching or evaluation methods are well aligned to the material or student audience, if the course content is aligned to the right student audience (majors or non-majors), or if perhaps the current

prerequisites are insufficient. These are all issues that could be considered to improve student success in historically-difficult courses.

While student success can be enhanced by the above efforts, no system, initiative, or course will ever be perfect for every student. Therefore, implementing an early warning system or retention management system (described in the previous section) will serve as a safety net for students who are experiencing academic difficulty in their courses. An early warning system could help connect students to support services such as tutoring or academic literacies. This would then help students to manage or adapt to the instructional and assessment challenges they are experiencing in their courses.

In summary, institutional and instructional challenges could possibly be mitigated by continued enrollment management efforts to ensure course availability, providing professional development regarding advising practices and encouraging students not to delay enrollment in courses such as mathematics and foreign language. Furthermore, the university administration should advance a culture of professional development regarding teaching and learning by publicizing the mission of the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE), rewarding involvement in efforts to improve student learning, and encouraging departments and faculty to analyze courses with high levels of D, F, and W grades. Additionally, implementing an early warning system may act as a safety net and connect students to resources to help them manage instructional challenges that they face.

Improving Advising and Mentoring Experiences

Advising is the most important component of any institutional retention effort (Thomas, 1990 as cited in Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Most universities are underutilizing and poorly administering their advising programs (Engle & O'Brien, 2007) and national surveys indicate

that academic advising is one aspect of college that students are generally the least satisfied (Kuh, 2008). If retention is to become a priority at UWSP, then advising should also become a priority.

Many students reported that they lacked meaningful advising and mentoring experiences. In some cases, communication with advisors was lacking in depth, and in other cases, communication was absent. Regarding advising due to their probationary status, occasionally students were unaware of the requirement to visit their advisor. Others were apprehensive to visit their advisor because it was the advisor's class that they failed or they were unsure of whom exactly they were supposed to see. Students frequently viewed their faculty advisors as "schedule-checkers" and often viewed professors as unapproachable, too busy for them, and uncaring. Students desired more one-on-one time with faculty and advisors, and they desired more guidance and personalized attention.

There are many potential options to consider for improvement. For example, the current advising system could be enhanced through extensive professional development of faculty. Another option would be for each academic unit to analyze their current advising practices and make adjustments accordingly. Yet a third option would be to develop and implement a dual-advising system, where students are advised by both a faculty member in their major as well as an academic staff member who is an expert in student support, student retention, and perhaps the General Education Program. This last option would relieve faculty from the pressure of becoming experts in, yet another, important aspect of student support and retention. Allen and Smith (2008) state that expecting faculty to excel in all areas of advising may be unrealistic since faculty are already expected to teach, conduct disciplinary research, participate in institutional governance, provide service to the broader community and their discipline, and often times secure external funding.

The current advising system at UWSP involves most students being advised by faculty advisors (including 70% of all incoming freshmen). Enhancing the current system might involve professional development for faculty regarding effective advising practices, especially when working with students experiencing academic difficulty. Additionally, training regarding the specific needs of new, transfer, and upper-level students may be important to meet the unique needs of each group. The students interviewed expressed a desire for more information about whether particular courses would match well with their strengths and interests. While this first requires the faculty advisor to spend time getting to know the student's strengths and interests, it would also require some education about the variety of courses offered, perhaps especially General Degree Requirement courses as they are outside of a student's major. A related matter is the ability to discuss whether an on-line course might be suitable for a student by informing them about the challenges that others have stated with this delivery format. Faculty advisors could also be made aware of challenges expressed by students such as taking two or more historically-difficult courses or taking courses long after their math or foreign language placement test. Faculty could also be educated on how to recognize the signs of a student who might be experiencing interference from a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability and how to respectfully enquire about or discuss such a topic with a student. Thorough knowledge about support services such as tutoring, career services, disability services, and counseling would also be important in order to make appropriate referrals. Perhaps more important may be how to reduce a student's potential reluctance to use such services. Financial aid education would also be helpful for faculty in order to share information with students who express financial pressures. Information about the many co-curricular opportunities is also important for the student's social and academic integration. Additionally, professional development may be in order regarding the

messages that might be conveyed to students when faculty members project a busy image in or out of the classroom or when probationary students are not followed up with.

These professional development recommendations could be made possible through several means. One option may be to pair a new faculty advisor with a full-time academic staff advisor who would mentor them through the many nuances of high-quality advising. However, the interviews revealed that many long-time professors need to refine their advising practices as well. On-going professional development may be necessary for some seasoned faculty to keep abreast of new advising features such as technological updates as well as current research. A handbook for faculty advisors could be created including the many aspects of advising. An on-line version would allow for regular updates. However, creating such a handbook does not actually ensure that it gets used. Therefore, an on-line training could possibly be created that each faculty advisor would be required to complete. Currently, the institution has such an on-line training for sexual harassment and Institutional Review Board procedures. Faculty members teaching the newly developed First Year Seminar are meant to serve as advisors to students in those courses and therefore, should also receive proper training. Professional development of faculty advisors may help some students to acquire the resources they need to continue progressing toward their goal of degree attainment as well as strengthen their social and academic integration into the university.

However, Allen and Smith (2008) state that it may be unrealistic to expect faculty to provide advising on all aspects of a student's curricular and co-curricular educational needs and that pleas to improve the reward structure of advising in higher education have been largely ineffective. Therefore, it is possible that alternative advising models should be considered at UWSP. One such option might be for each department to analyze their current advising practices

by surveying both students and faculty to assess the current state and potential areas for improvement. They could then make adjustments accordingly. For example, a department might choose to centralize advising with only a few faculty members who are well-trained and who excel at advising. This is often what happens anyway. Allen and Smith (2008) note that students figure out which faculty members are good advisors and an imbalance of advising load evolves. If a department centralizes advising with a few individuals, they should be compensated in some way, perhaps through a course release or other form of compensation.

Another option to enhance the advising experience of students is to possibly implement a dual-advising system. In this system a student would have two advisors, the first being a faculty member in their major who assists the student with courses both within and related to their major and the second, a student affairs professional who is well-versed in co-curricular matters, student support and resources, and other retention matters. In some instances a student affairs advisor also serves to advise students regarding courses in the General Education Program (GEP) that match well with their interests, skills, and abilities. They may also serve as the key person who meets with students regarding any probationary issues and explores the various difficulties that they may be experiencing. The student affairs advisor could help fill the role of the caring staff person that the students interviewed were craving. They could also refer the student to the faculty advisor as appropriate or other resources as needed.

A dual-advising system would likely work well at UWSP. Some departments already use such a model successfully. Because the students interviewed for this study feared being judged and many were reluctant to seek help from professors who came across as seeming uninterested in them. Faculty may be interested, but perhaps are simply uninformed about the issues that students need from advising. Some students interviewed implied that they would be more likely

to discuss their study skills and habits, difficulties in courses, financial challenges, personal or family problems, or diagnosed or suspected disabilities with those who are not in a position of power over their grades.

Admittedly, it might be unrealistic to provide a dual-advising situation for all students. However, it perhaps could be explored for high-risk populations such as freshmen, sophomores, and transfer students. It might also be made available for any student who does not wish to meet with their faculty advisor (for example, the students who did not meet with their advisor after being placed on probation because they had failed their professor's course). The dual-advising system could be managed within each college or could be part of the current Student Academic Advising Center (SAAC). Regardless of where such a dual-advising system might be housed, it needs to be communicated clearly to students which advisor to see when. This will ensure that students feel properly supported and cared for, rather than like they are being cast off to be somebody else's problem (as one student interviewed felt).

Since advising is such an important part of student retention, UWSP should make strengthening its advising practices a priority. Professional development for faculty regarding the many important aspects of advising is a worthwhile endeavor. However, a dual-advising system where each student has both a faculty advisor for their curricular needs and a student affairs professional for their co-curricular, resource, and perhaps GEP needs is more realistic solution for improving the overall quality of advising. A dual-advising system might at least be implemented for the populations in transition who are most likely to drop out such as freshmen, sophomores, and transfer students. Although, it is warned that smaller-scale interventions often do not reach enough students to make a big enough impact on overall student retention (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Tinto, 1999).

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Probationary Intervention Program

Being placed on academic probation is a clear sign to both the student and the institution that the student is struggling academically and not making sufficient progress toward their degree. Large-scale studies have found that institutions with high graduation rates have pro-active advising programs (intrusive advising and early warning systems) in place to monitor student performance and to intervene early (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Because academic success is closely tied to retention, UWSP should perhaps consider implementing a mandatory intervention program (intrusive or mandatory advising) for students on probation to assist them with achieving their academic goals.

Probationary intervention programs were described earlier in the literature review section. Recall that these programs were most effective when they were mandatory, had both group and one-on-one components, and addressed both study skills and counseling/advising needs. They were also most effective when they were longer-term, such as eight or more meetings.

Due to the reluctance to seek help expressed by many of the students interviewed (especially males), if a probationary intervention program is implemented at UWSP, it should be mandatory. Many universities have mandatory programs for probationary students. Currently, the notification that UWSP students receive about their probationary status states that they "must" meet with their advisor. However, nothing happens when they fail to comply with this requirement. Some universities impose penalties for lack of compliance such as registration holds, fees, or even being dropped from course enrollment. These penalties are effective in getting students to comply with the requirements of probationary intervention and could be considered at UWSP as well.

The vast web of themes that emerged in the interviews suggests that a probationary intervention program at UWSP should have both a study skills and a counseling/advising component. Lack of study skills was the most prominent theme, but a variety of other challenges were experienced by students as well. A counseling/advising component would allow for better identification of the variety of challenges that each student may be facing and would also allow for meaningful guidance.

The intense negative reaction that some students had to being placed on probation is a concern that could also be addressed through a mandatory component. Students with lower GPAs tend to have a greater need for counseling services than those with higher GPAs and often times this may be to help them deal with their feelings of failure (Wlazelek & Coulter, 1999). These feelings of failure can have an impact on a student's willingness to persist in college, especially early in their college career. One study found that higher ability freshmen students dropped out at a greater rate than lower ability freshmen students after being placed on probation due to a loss of self-perceived ability and self-confidence (Lindo, Sanders, & Oreopoulos, 2010). Because 75% of the students who leave UWSP are academically eligible to continue (i.e. not suspended, although they may be experiencing difficulty), it may be a loss of self-confidence and loss of perceived ability that causes them to drop out. Therefore, interventions with students on probation should involve a counseling/advising component.

Following the national trends for greatest success with a probationary intervention program, group and one-on-one sessions are also recommended. Only two of the students interviewed who had graduated above the 50th percentile in high school felt that their probation was an anomaly in their college career. These students did not feel they would necessarily need several weeks of group sessions learning about study skills. However, these same students said

that spending an hour or two in a group workshop learning about probationary rules and regulations, campus resources, and having a few individual meetings with a caring, knowledgeable advisor would be helpful. Students who had achieved average or lower grades in high school regularly admitted to having poor study habits and skills. These students expressed that longer-term, mandatory meetings to help them improve their academic success strategies would be helpful to them. They also liked the idea of having one-on-one time with a caring, knowledgeable advisor. However, they admitted that if such meetings (group or one-on-one) were not mandatory, they would be less likely to follow through with them on their own.

Based on the number of students on probation at UWSP, the effectiveness of probationary intervention programs nationwide, as well as the feedback received from the student interviews for this study, a fusion of the above options may be a good solution. All students placed on probation could be required to attend a group meeting where they could be made aware of the rules and regulations of academic probation. Campus resources such as tutoring, counseling, disability services, and career services could also be discussed in detail as well as advising options including information about exploring other majors. Additionally, details of a mandatory, credit-bearing, 8-week academic success workshop could also be shared. Each probationary student could be automatically enrolled in the 8-week academic success workshop. However, a student could potentially be excused from this longer-term commitment if they meet one-on-one with an advisor (who is an expert in assisting students experiencing academic difficulty) and the advisor sees it fit to excuse them from the commitment. However, if they fail to make sufficient academic progress the following semester, they would then be required to attend the academic success workshop.

Students early in their college career are most at risk of dropping out and UWSP is especially interested in improving its retention rate of students between their first and second year. However, the data revealed that students up through their third semester were the most overrepresented as experiencing academic difficulty. Therefore, a mandatory intervention program should potentially focus on freshmen and sophomore students if financing or staffing such a program for the entire student body is not feasible. A third population for mandatory intervention might also be transfer students.

A mandatory probationary intervention program is a logical option for assisting students at UWSP who are experiencing academic difficulty. Such a program could address virtually all of the challenges that students expressed such as lack of study skills, some institutional and instructional challenges, lack of meaningful advising experiences, lack of knowledge about support services, interference from disabilities, financial difficulties, family or social challenges, and especially reluctance to voluntarily seek help. It could also address the negative reaction that students had to being placed on probation.

Exit Interviews or Surveys

Due to the link between academic success and retention, this study merely assumes that students who leave UWSP before completing their degree may experience many of the same challenges as the students interviewed for this study. However, exit interviews or surveys conducted with students who actually leave UWSP may reveal additional explanations which could assist the university with its retention mission. For example, it might be found that many students leave and enroll at another university to participate in a program of study that UWSP does not offer. There may be other reasons as well. Without exit interviews or surveys, it is simply unknown and therefore unable to be addressed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, students experiencing academic difficulty at UWSP generally mirror those experiencing difficulty nationwide. Demographic characteristics of students who were overrepresented on probation compared to the general student body included students who were: male; of lower prior academic achievement; early in their college career; ethnic or racial minorities; first-generation college students; transfers; low-income; and over the age of 24.

Students interviewed cited many reasons for their difficulties which also mirrored the national literature. The primary reason included under-preparedness or lacking academic success strategies appropriate for college-level academic work. This included: under-developed study skills and habits; underestimating the level of detail, difficulty, depth or extent of knowledge necessary to do well in courses; underestimating the time necessary to devote to schoolwork to do well; inappropriate time management; lack of motivation; and/or prioritizing other activities over academics. Even some students of high ability had challenges in this area, although less so than lower ability.

Additional experiences that contributed to students' overall difficulty in college included institutional and instructional challenges, lack of meaningful advising and mentoring experiences, reluctance to seek help, lack of knowledge or use of support services, interference from disabilities, financial challenges, extended absences, and family, personal, or social challenges.

As a result of this study, three issues are of particular concerns regarding the efforts to improve student success and retention of those experiencing academic difficulty. These are: the complex and unique web of challenges that each student faced; the reluctance to seek help by many students; and the intense reaction to their lack of academic progress. First, each student was experiencing their own unique combination of the above challenges. While several students

experienced the same challenges, no two students had the same combination of issues. Each set of challenges worked together synergistically to compound student difficulties.

The second critical concern is that many students were reluctant to seek help when they could have benefitted from assistance. This reluctance included asking questions in class, interacting with professors in their office (both for extra help and advising), and using support services. Students feared being judged as inferior and weak by unfamiliar peers and professors. Subsequently, these reluctant students were attempting to navigate their college experiences and challenges on their own, without the guidance and support of university faculty and staff professionals and para-professionals such as tutors.

The third critical concern is that several students had intense reactions to their lack of academic progress. They described being placed on probation as traumatic, shameful, and embarrassing. Some were fearful or uncertain of their future, and one even described symptoms of depression. These reactions signify a loss of self-confidence in their perceived ability. Some students will respond to a probationary notice by reassessing their goals, priorities, and abilities and change their strategies in order to be successful in college. However, others respond by believing that college is not for them and instead choose to leave rather than risk continued failure.

Because of the similarities between students at UWSP and students at other colleges who are experiencing academic difficulty, it follows that effective interventions elsewhere should also be effective at UWSP. Therefore, recommendations include assisting students with the development of academic success strategies possibly through: supporting and expanding current courses that focus on this area (such as Library Resources, Study Skills, and First Year Seminar); by making all tutoring services free for all students; and by implementing an early warning or

retention management system to help identify students who may need support early. It is also

recommended that UWSP address institutional and instructional challenges possibly through:

continuing its current enrollment management efforts to provide enough seats for students in the

courses they want and need; providing on-going faculty development in effective pedagogy and

assessment; and analyzing historically difficulty courses for potential adjustments to curriculum,

prerequisites, or additional support. UWSP should also improve the advising and mentoring

experiences of students possibly through analyzing current advising practices and making

adjustments, intensive professional development of faculty advisors, or implementing a dual-

advising system. UWSP may also benefit from implementing a probationary intervention

program to support students with the multiple challenges that they face. If such a program were

implemented, it should be mandatory, provide both group and individual support, and have both

a study skills and counseling/advising focus. Additionally, conducting exit interviews or surveys

may continue to inform the institution about student challenges and how it might continue to

improve its retention rate. These recommendations will likely help to create a culture that stands

out as truly valuing student success and have a positive impact on student retention and

graduation rates.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about how you ended up on academic probation?

    a. How did you feel when you first found out?

    b. Was it a surprise to be on probation?

    c. Do your grades differ from high school?

2. Have you done anything different this semester than last to try to get off probation?

    a. Describe your current study habits?

    b. Do your study habits now differ from last semester?

    c. Are they different from high school?

3. If you met with your advisor after being placed on probation, what do you recall discussing with them?

    a. Was your advisor active in helping you plan classes?

    b. Do you feel that you got good advice from your advisor?

    c. If you did not meet with your advisor after being placed on probation, why not?

4. Do you have a faculty or staff member who you feel like you can go for help or with questions or concerns that you may have? (How about a friend?)

5. Tell me about your out-of-classroom activities such as work or extra-curricular activities?

    a. How much time do you commit to these activities?

    b. Does this involvement differ from high school?

6. Have you used support services such as tutoring, counseling, career center, etc.?

    a. If so, what has been your experience with them?

    b. If not, why haven't you used these services?

7. What support or assistance do you think would help you to improve your academic performance?

8. Do you think the university could be doing things differently regarding students on probation? If so, what?

9. Would you be in favor of a mandatory program specifically to help students on probation?

    a. Why or Why not?

    b. If so, what might it look like?

Appendix B

Themes from Student Interviews and Recommendations

Note. Bulleted list does not necessarily correlate horizontally. Bulleted recommendations may address one or more of lettered descriptors of the theme.)

1. Under-Preparedness / Lacking Academic Success Strategies

a) Underdeveloped study skills and habits, especially independent learning skills

b) Underestimating the level of detail, difficulty, depth, or extent of knowledge required to succeed

c) Underestimating time necessary to devote to studying outside of class to be successful

d) Inappropriate time management

e) Prioritizing other activities over academics

f) Lack of motivation

Recommendations:

- Continuation and expansion of support services such as tutoring and academic literacies

- Free tutoring

- Continuation and expansion of course (Study Skills - Ed 105 & Library Resources - LR 101)

- Further development of First Year Seminar

- Early warning system

- Probationary intervention program

2. Lack of Meaningful Advising and Mentoring Experiences

a) Lack of approachability and connection to faculty advisors and professors

b) Apprehensive to visit advisor after failing advisor's class

c) Faculty advisors did not take time to get to know student

d) Advising appointment consisted of schedule-checking (Lacking guidance, direction, and depth)

e) Students desired more meaningful, personalized, one-on-one interactions with faculty advisors

f) Faculty advisors lacked availability, follow through with advising requests

g) Difficulty navigating different advising systems (peer, staff, faculty advisors)

Recommendations:

- Continuation and expansion of Student Academic Advising Center

- Professional development for faculty regarding advising

- Enhanced university communication plan regarding support services (faculty, staff, students, and family)

- Enhanced university communication plan regarding probationary regulations (faculty, staff, students)

- Dual advising for freshman, sophomore, transfer, and probationary students

- Further development of First Year Seminar

- Early warning system

- Probationary intervention program

3. Institutional and Instructional Challenges

a) Lack of seat availability

b) Courses perceived as irrelevant to future education or career goals

c) Simultaneous enrollment in two or more historically-difficult courses

d) Taking courses long after placement exam

e) Few evaluations/lack of feedback before drop date

f) Mismatch of course delivery or evaluation methods to student learning style and strengths

g) Challenges with online courses

Recommendations:

- Continue enrollment management initiative

- Professional development regarding advising practices

- Analysis of courses with high D, F, W

- Assess need for curriculum alignment

- Professional development for faculty regarding advising practices, active learning strategies, and assessment

- Further increase and enhance the presence of Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE)

- Early warning system

4. Reluctance to Seek Help

a) Large class sizes intimidating

b) Intimidated by professors

c) Fear of being judged

d) Sociocultural value of independence

Recommendations:

- Semantic change regarding how support services are communicated

- Cultural change regarding how support services are perceived

- Further development of First Year Seminar

- Early warning system

- Probationary intervention program

5. Knowledge and Use of Support Services

a) Unaware of services

b) Unfamiliar with extent of services

c) Presumption about how services were delivered

Recommendations:

- Enhance communication to increase knowledge and use of support services

- Relocate support offices

- Early warning system

- Probationary intervention program

6. Interference from Disabilities

a) Diagnosed disabilities - not taking medication

b) Diagnosed disabilities - not registered with Disability Services, no accommodations

c) Undiagnosed and untreated disabilities (mainly ADD/ADHD)

Recommendations:

- Enhance communication to increase knowledge and use of disability services

- Professional development for faculty regarding disability services

- Early warning system

- Probationary intervention program

7. Financial Challenges

a) Balancing the demands of work and school

b) Drugs - selling to earn money, taking due to money pressures

c) Lack of knowledge about financial aid

Recommendations:

- Enhance communication to increase knowledge and use of financial aid
- Free support services such as tutoring and career services
- Policy analysis and evaluation
- Probationary intervention program

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8. Family, Personal, and Social Challenges

a) Unhappy family life

b) Parents divorcing

c) Death in family

d) Legal issues/Jail

e) Lack of connection to a social group

Recommendations:

- Early warning system
- Probationary intervention program

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9. Extended Absences

a) Multiple reasons possible (illness, family crisis, legal issues)

b) Understanding professors, but lacked time and tools to complete required work

Recommendations:

- Policy analysis and evaluation
- Free tutoring
- Early warning system
- Probationary intervention program

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10. Web of Compounding Challenges

a) Each student had distinctive characteristics and faced a unique web of multiple challenges

Recommendations:

- Early warning system
- Probationary intervention program

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11. Reaction to Being on Probation

a) Traumatic, shameful, fearful, embarrassed, devastated, shocked, scared

b) Depression

Recommendations:

- Mandatory, intrusive advising for probationary students
- Probationary intervention program

Appendix C

E-mail Invitation to Participate in Study

Hello,

You have been chosen to participate in a study about students on academic probation. We wish to explore how students understand and navigate their probationary experiences. Your participation in this study will assist us in making recommendations for how the university can better support students on probation. Your participation will help us to suggest improvements in communication, organization, and policy.

I would like to interview you about your experiences prior to and since being placed on academic probation. I believe an interview is the best way to understand student experiences. All information gathered through the interview will be <u>anonymous</u>. <u>Your identity will be protected</u> and any information which could identify you will not be released.

For your time and effort we are able to offer you free tutoring services for the remainder of the semester (for any course in which the Tutoring Center provides tutoring). You will also be eligible for a 1 in 20 chance to win a $20 gift certificate to the campus book store. Other than this, there may be no immediate benefit to you. However, we anticipate that the results of this study will help the university to better support students on in the future.

<u>Please contact me by Wednesday April 7 if you would like to participate.</u> You can simply reply to this e-mail or call my office at 346-3752 and we will arrange a convenient time to meet.

Thank you,
Toni Sage

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Footnotes

[i] The Strategies for Academic Success Program draws from several theories including Glasser's Reality Therapy, Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Covey's models for personal success.

[ii] A writing emphasis course provides instruction necessary to develop skills for appropriate and successful writing within a discipline or profession. They are generally considered by students to have a heavy writing requirement as compared to other courses.