

## **APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A concerned faculty, staff, or peer advisor is in a key position to assist students who are struggling academically. Some advisees simply need reassurance or someone to talk with about their academic concerns. Others need to know the implications of their academic performance and require encouragement to change unworkable approaches to their education. Early intervention by an advisor can make a significant difference in student retention, which clearly benefits not only the student, but the University. Many disqualification- or attrition-prone students, with only a modest amount of assistance, are able to change directions enough to succeed.

Advisors have access to PeopleSoft advising screens containing extensive information about students, and there are many online resources to help students and advisors: <http://em.csuchico.edu/aap/Undergrad/probation/>. Training in the use of these screens is available through the Academic Advising Programs office. University policy and procedures relevant to academic probation and disqualification are found in the “Academic Policies and Regulations” section of the *University Catalog*, and the Advising staff is always happy to answer questions or offer clarification.

### **WARNING SIGNS**

Probation is not the only sign to watch for in identifying an academically at risk student. Any of the following may be cause for concern:

- Repeated poor performance or failure in core courses required for the major, particularly those which are prerequisite for advanced work.
- A pattern of dropping courses.
- A history of incomplete grades.
- Avoidance of one or more “difficult” courses in the major.
- Indications of non-productive approaches to studying (“I study for hours, but nothing seems to sink in”, or “I think I’m prepared for a test, and then fail it”).
- Pledging a fraternity or sorority, if in combination with one or more of these other indicators.
- Failure to complete preparatory or GE math and/or English 130/30 with grades of C- or better.

- Working more than 20 hours per week, or variable hours of employment where the student does not have good control over when and how much he or she will work.
- Health problems which hinder class attendance and performance.
- A semester GPA inconsistently low compared to previous semesters, even though the student may not be on probation.
- Low high school grades in preparatory course work for the major, particularly in math and science (ask the student – self reports are generally reliable).
- A long absence from school, particularly if the student will be enrolling in technical course work and has not had an opportunity to keep basic skills sharp.
- Disinterest or only passive interest in the major (many students declare a program for the wrong reasons, such as parental influence or assumptions about a favorable job market without first validating their interest in the major).
- Persistence in the same major and continued poor performance by a disqualified student who has been reinstated, or by any student who persists despite repeated failure in key areas.
- Marginal work at a community college, particularly in the major. Approximately 50 percent of students whose transfer GPA is 2.5 or less receive grades placing them on academic probation at the end of their first semester of enrollment at the University.
- Relatively low SAT or ACT scores (advisors should be cautious in interpreting scores if they are unfamiliar with these tests).

### **WHAT CAN THE ADVISOR DO TO HELP?**

First, recognize that the indicators above may only suggest problems. In many cases, the student may be well aware of the problems and may have taken positive steps without prodding.

Likewise, though the indicators may exist, your advisee may be coping quite well in other ways and will overcome any deficiencies in due time.

Call the implications of some of the indicators to your advisee's attention. For example, try openers like these:

- “We’ve noted that when students fail this course (have weak grades in high school, math, etc.), they tend to have trouble with the major and some don’t make it. How do you feel you’re doing?”
- “How committed are you to majoring in our program?” “Are you under any pressure to continue in this major?”
- “How does this major fit into your career goals?” “What alternatives are you considering if you’re unable to improve your performance in your program?”
- Have you discussed your goals and grades with your family?”

In other words, encourage them to talk about their assessment of their status, progress, chances to succeed in, and/or commitment to the program.

Most students appreciate directness in your pointing out the implications of their academic performance and alternative courses of action. But the right to fail is theirs. We want to help them define the best possible educational experience and make effective use of the University and its resources. They may appreciate a kind recommendation that they should consider alternative majors more in line with their interests and/or abilities. But, remember, our ability to predict an outcome is limited; many students will surprise us. Ideally, we will help them reach decisions about how to improve their chances of succeeding in their major or to change, without the decision being imposed on them.

Some students don't feel they have the freedom to change their majors or direction. For personal or cultural reasons they may not have taken much responsibility for determining the major directions of their lives. This is often the result of perceived, and real, parental influence. These are delicate areas, but ones which students may appreciate the opportunity to discuss.

## **HELPFUL RESOURCES AND APPROACHES**

- Refer student to Academic Advising Programs (SSC 120, x5712) to explore more deeply the student's academic status and/or alternative academic programs and careers. This office will also clarify academic status policy and procedures and can assist in the interpretation of other academic procedures.
- Refer to Evaluations (SSC 120, x5957) for an updated Degree Progress Report and consultation.
- Encourage reduction of hours the student is employed each week.
- Discuss realistic use of time. In general, one credit hour (unit) equates to one hour of class time per week, **and** two hours of study time outside of class, for a total of three hours of time commitment per unit. A good general formula to achieve balance and time management is:  $3 \times (\text{number of units}) + (\text{number of hours per week committed to work, commuting, athletics, family obligations, co-curricular involvements, etc.}) \leq 60$  hours. In other words, a student who is enrolled in 12 units would have an academic time commitment of at least 36 hours, and should not commit to more than 24 hours per week of outside-class activity, including work.
- Refer to the Student Learning Center (SSC 340, x6839) to explore better strategies and tutoring assistance, as well as assistance with writing skills. Students may take a diagnostic survey of study and learning skills at the SLC. The Center also offers workshops on various student and learning skills.
- Refer to Counseling and Wellness (SSC 430, x6345), particularly if the student seems to be experiencing personal and emotional problems, is highly anxious, stressed, or depressed.

- Refer to the Financial Aid Office (SSC 250, x 6451) for assistance to students with severe financial problems. Frequently students who have dropped or failed classes are tempted to carry excessively heavy loads in order to “catch up” and retain their financial aid eligibility. A phone call to a financial aid counselor may be particularly helpful in order to get clarification of alternatives.
- Refer to Disability Support Services (SSC 170, x5959) to assist students with disabilities, or for those who you suspect may have a learning disability.
- Refer international students with serious academic problems to International Student Advising (SSC 440, x6880) and/or to Academic Advising Programs--Evaluations (SSC 120, x5957).
- Refer students with uncertain career goals to the Career Planning and Placement Office (SSC 270, x5253).
- Refer to advising coordinators in related majors more appropriate to a student’s aptitude or interest; suggest that the student first explore the MAP (major academic plan) for any major of interest <http://em.csuchico.edu/aap/ProgramSearch/>.
- Reassess course load for the current or coming semester, including the possibility of dropping out (perhaps taking a PEL, Planned Educational Leave) or transferring to a community college for a term.
- Consider the Repeat with Forgiveness policy. It also helps to check to see if the student has any outstanding grades of Incomplete (I), which too often students neglect or ignore.

Note that not every personal problem is a cause for referral. Students may benefit simply by concerned advisors hearing them out and providing some positive reinforcement and clarification.

## **SUGGESTIONS REGARDING REFERRALS**

The information and assistance available in various University offices overlaps a little. Don’t worry if you’re not quite on target in referring a student. A quick phone call to one of us can frequently help sort out the most appropriate source of help:

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|---------------------------------|---------|-------|
| • Counseling and Wellness       | SSC 430 | x6345 |
| • Career Planning and Placement | SSC 270 | x5253 |
| • Academic Advising Programs    | SSC 120 | x5712 |
| • Academic Evaluations          | SSC 120 | x5957 |

Many students will not follow through on your suggestion that they contact another office. To increase the chances of follow through, phone now and set up the appointment, if the student is willing. Better yet, hand the phone to the student to place the call. You may first need to obtain confirmation from the student that he or she is interested in talking with someone in the office you’ve suggested.

In many cases, it is highly desirable to refer the student to a specific staff member, rather than to an office in general. Personalizing the referral eases the way.

In unusual and particularly stressful situations, you may put the student more at ease by simply asking if he or she would like you to come with the student to the office.

## CONCLUSION

There are no easy answers, nor single solutions to the problems encountered in working with students with academic problems. There are rewards as students make the adjustments and begin to take more responsibility for their lives. The student benefits as does the University, and you may feel a sense of satisfaction with the growth and progress which resulted in part from your concern.

Staff in the Academic Advising Programs office are always very willing to assist you. Phone us at x5712 and ask to speak with the advisor on duty or, if you prefer, with the Advisor or Evaluator assigned to your college (or the college of the student's major):

<b>College</b>	<b>Advisor</b>	<b>Evaluator</b>
Agriculture	Troy Berry	Jackie Murad
Behavioral and Social Science	Dami Hammer	Beth DiMaggio
Business	Kim Dufour	Jason Stapleton
Communication and Education	Rebecca Berner	Kathy Ramos
Engineering, Computer Science and Construction Management	Jason Stapleton	Debi Coopriider
Humanities and Fine Arts	Kaitlyn Baumgartner	Charlene Armitage
Liberal Studies	Troy Berry	Kathy Ramos
Natural Sciences	Troy Berry	Rebecca Rencher