A MOTIVATIONAL/EMPOWERMENT MODEL APPLIED TO STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a motivational/empowerment model for students on academic probation implemented at The University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG). The model draws from several theoretical orientations, and includes individual and group interaction as well as discussion in four key topic areas: personal responsibility, positive affirmations, goal setting/life planning, and self-management. Since implementation, the percentage of UNCG students eligible to return to the institution after being placed on academic probation has increased from 40% to 58% over a four-year period. When comparing the net gain in grade point average of students completing the program to a control group, students enrolled in the program had a significantly higher academic achievement ($p = .036$). Generalizability of the model and future research recommendations are explored in the article.

The door to college is open for increasing numbers of students for whom adapting to college may be a great challenge. Hansen (1998) has noted that the overall academic preparation level has declined for students entering college and that academic disengagement in college has increased among many students. Choy (2003) has described contemporary college students as a diverse group in which 30% are minorities, 20% were born outside the United States or have a

foreign-born parent, and 11% spoke a language other than English while growing up. Choy also emphasizes that most college students have responsibilities outside the classroom. For example, about three-quarters of all four-year college students now earn a paycheck, and about one-quarter of them work full time.

These examples suggest that many students are at risk for failure because of weak academic skills, personal circumstances, and other potential difficulties in adapting to the college environment. These students may leave college without the benefits associated with a degree and the skills necessary for future success (Dunn, 1995). In an effort to improve retention, many institutions are enrolling students who have received poor grades into academic probation programs. In this article, we explore the types of programs that have been implemented for students on academic probation, and describe a unique model at The University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) that has been exceptionally successful at assisting these students.

PROGRAMS FOR PROBATION STUDENTS

Programs for students on academic probation tend to fall into one of two categories: a) those where students are involved in classroom or workshop-based interventions, and b) those where students work individually with a counselor or advisor.

Classroom/Workshop Interventions

A number of institutions have adapted interventions that involve the use of regular classroom sessions. At Long Beach City College (California), the Students and Teachers Achieving Results (STAR) program emphasizes making connections among classes, with students forming cohorts and participating together in a series of related coursework (Mackay, 1996). The Academic Choices and Transitions (ACT) program at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville is primarily a study skills course intervention although the program requires students to meet with their faculty mentor at least three times during the semester (Martino & DeClue, 2003). Both the University of Iowa and the University of Kentucky offer a limited number of classroom interventions for students while the courses are not mandatory for all probation students (Corkery, McGreevey, Yoder, & Folsom, 2003; Shanks, 2002). In addition, Brocato (2000) describes the effective use of workshops for academic probation students at the University of Southern California.

These models can be effective. They provide opportunities for students to interact with peers and with faculty or staff at their university, an approach that is supported by Astin's *Theory of Involvement* (1984) as well as Richard Light's (2001) work. They also assist students in helping feel connected to campus, which Tinto (1993) asserts is a key to student retention. However, these programs do not

require frequent student interaction with instructors or support personnel outside the classroom, a system for rewarding participation, or a comprehensive theoretical model.

Advising/Counseling Models

A number of schools have adopted models for intervening with probation students that involve counseling or advising sessions. At Bronx Community College, students on academic probation meet with peers to work out a plan for getting off probation (Finklestein, 2002). At Ohio University, the ExCEL program matches students on academic probation with peer advisors who assist individually in developing goals and time management plans (Ting, Grant, & Plenert, 2000).

These are just a few examples of the advising counseling models used to assist probation students. While they do not provide opportunities to interact with a group of students in similar circumstances, they do permit students to feel connected with at least one person on campus which Light (2001) has found to be a key variable in student retention. They also allow support personnel to tailor their efforts to meet individual students' needs. However, these programs tend to lack the emphasis on connecting students with peers with similar concerns to form support groups, a system for rewarding participation, or a comprehensive theoretical model.

While both *classroom/workshop* and *advising/counseling* intervention models have varying degrees of success, they rarely use specific theoretical orientations for explaining student achievement and success. There is seldom an effort to bundle both advising counseling and classroom workshop intervention methods in assisting the same group of students. Typically, the impact of the intervention is evaluated by the number of students who remain enrolled for the next academic period, rather than through examining changes in student attitudes, aspirations, or abilities. In contrast, UNCG's Strategies for Academic Success (SAS) program is based on theoretical orientations proposed in *Reality Therapy* (Glasser, 2000), *Appreciative Inquiry* (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003), *Social Cognitive Theory* (Bandura, 1997), and Covey's (1989) models for personal success, uses an integrated model of advising counseling and classroom workshop approaches, and employs an innovative and comprehensive method of measuring intervention outcomes.

THE MOTIVATIONAL/EMPOWERMENT MODEL

Four key topic areas are essential to the implementation of the motivational/empowerment model in the Strategies for Academic Success (SAS) program. These four areas provide a theoretical framework for the program and include: personal responsibility, positive affirmations, goal setting/life planning, and

self-management. The "Table" for Student Success (see Figure 1) provides a snapshot of the model implemented in the SAS program. The four legs of the table (personal responsibility, positive affirmations, goal setting/life planning, and self-management) provide the stability of the program. A table was chosen as a visual for the model because if one "leg" is not present or "broken," the whole table is unstable. This emphasizes the importance of all four legs to the Table for Student Success. On the face of the table includes a rotating circle between group interaction support of other students on academic probation and individual interaction with the facilitator. The rotating circle represents the ongoing and continuous engagement of the students with peers and the facilitator. All six areas represented on the table are essential to the implementation of the program presented here and explained in detail below.

Personal Responsibility

Glasser's (2000) work provides a basis for the personal responsibility component of the SAS program. When students accept personal responsibility for themselves, they choose their own destiny. The practice of Reality Therapy is an
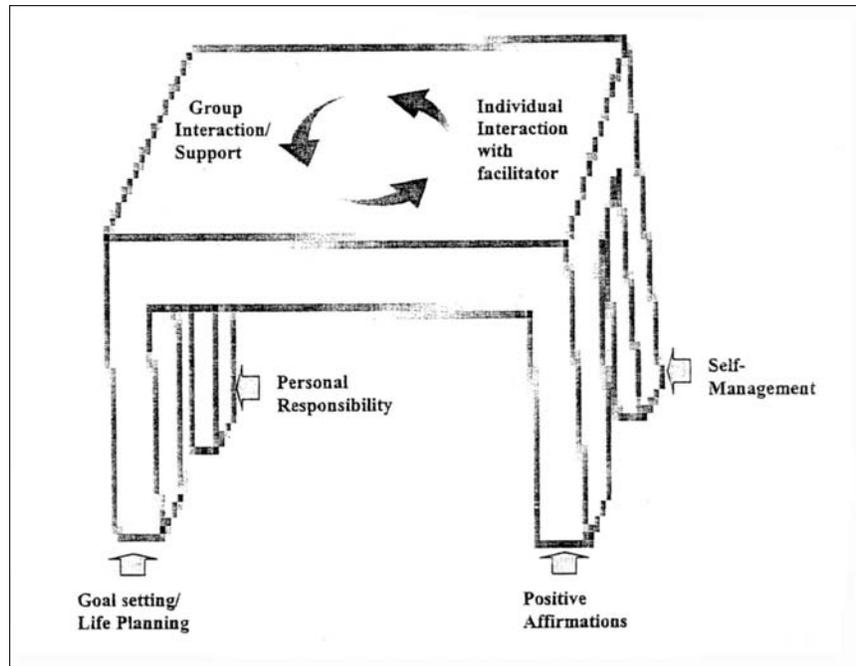

Figure 1. "Table" for Student Success.

ongoing process made up of two major components: a) creating a trusting environment, and b) using techniques which help a person discover what they really want, reflect on what they are doing know, and create a plan for fulfilling what they really want. Reality Therapy is a process of empowerment, based on the belief that people are products, but not victims, of the past. Reality Therapy motivates students by emphasizing the power of doing what is in the person's control.

Positive Affirmations

The use of positive self-talk and affirmations is a critical factor in changing the mindset of the student on academic probation. While many probation student programs focus on student's deficits, the model attempts to further enhance their strengths through the use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is a human systems business change model, developed at Case Western Reserve by Cooperrider and Srivastava that has recently been adapted to higher education and academic advising (Bloom & Martin, 2004). AI emphasizes the power of the positive question. AI focuses on the root causes of success (strength-based) rather than the root causes of failure (deficit-based). Students answer questions in the form of storytelling by drawing from positive life experiences and sharing the best of stories. The focus is on exploring "What is right" in their world and how they can create more of it (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

Life Planning and Goal-Setting

Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory provides a basis for the life planning goal-setting component of the model, emphasizing the importance of self-referent learning in which students activate and sustain behaviors that support academic achievement. Much of the research in self-regulated learning has emphasized that students can activate and sustain the cognitions and behaviors that support achievement. A central component of the SAS program is to support students in becoming self-regulated learners who set effective goals, employ appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate the requirements of learning tasks adequately in order to achieve at improved levels. Self-regulated learners learn to accomplish academic goals strategically, manage to overcome obstacles using a battery of resources, and feel greater confidence in the decisions they have made (Randi & Corno, 2000). Improvement in self-efficacy also assists students in achieving improved life-planning skills regarding career choice (Pajares, 1996), financial management (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992), and interpersonal skills (Bandura, 1997)—areas that are important elements of the SAS curriculum.

Self-Management

Students who are able to manage themselves and continuously plan and monitor their behaviors in pursuit of their goals are implementing self-management. The self-management component of the model is based on the work of Steven Covey (1989) and his text *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.* The curriculums in many student success classes are focused on "time management" instead of "self-management." The curriculum of the SAS program emphasizes "self-management" because, after all, a person cannot manage time, they can only manage themselves. In Covey's third habit, he suggests to "Put First Things First." Within that habit, Covey discusses the four quadrants of self-management and suggests that we should stay in Quadrant II (includes activities that are not urgent, yet important). The SAS curriculum addresses the importance of placing the most important things first in life.

Group and Individual Interaction

Along with the four components already discussed, group interaction with other students and individual interaction with the instructor are important to the success of the model. Students interact in a small group setting (a maximum of 10 students in each section) where reflection and self-disclosure occurs regularly. This model provides a supportive environment for the students in which they can easily relate to others in similar academic situations. The instructor facilitates the discussion and self-reflection in the model. Each student is required to meet with his or her instructor on two occasions during the eight weeks of the program. The reason(s) the student believes contributed to their poor academic performance, their current grades for the term, and their plans for restoring academic standing are discussed at these individual meetings. These individual meetings are instrumental to the success of the program and the model. While this relationship with an instructor can have profound influence, many SAS students comment that they have never talked individually with any of their instructors in a one-on-one setting before this program. We believe this relationship with the instructor is key given Astin's (1984) and Light's (2001) work indicating that connection to faculty inside and outside the classroom is central to student success and the retention of students.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM

There are two goals of the SAS program: for students to become interdependent, and for students to meet the academic good standing policy. The primary goal of the SAS program is for students on academic probation to act interdependently and gain valuable personal insight by taking responsibility, managing their behaviors, believing in themselves through the of use positive affirmations, and setting goals accordingly. If the student is not successful this semester, the skills

will still benefit them in their future endeavors. Specific objectives of the program are for students to learn to accept greater personal responsibility, increase self-motivation, master effective self-management strategies, revise self-defeating patterns, manage their emotional life, and improve creative and critical thinking skills.

The secondary goal of the program is for the students on academic probation to meet the academic standing policy for the institution. The UNCG's probation policy states that if the student has earned over 30 credit hours the student must receive a 2.3 GPA for the term, or raise their cumulative GPA to at or above a 2.0. If they have earned less than 30 credit hours, the student must receive a 2.3 GPA for the term, or raise their cumulative GPA to at or above a 1.75.

THE MOTIVATIONAL/EMPOWERMENT
MODEL IMPLEMENTED

Numerous changes have taken place in the SAS program since it started in the 1999 academic year. Figure 2 provides a timeline that includes key changes to the curriculum and implementation of the program. It is important to note that the program started as a study skills based program. The study skills curriculum did little to empower the students and the majority of students were suspended. The program started as a full-semester long course but now meets for eight weeks starting at the second week of school. The full-semester long course proved to be grueling and frustrating for both students and instructors, especially given that there is no academic credit for completing the course.

All possible efforts are made to ensure that all students required to take the course are enrolled by the first class meeting. Students are contacted via letter, e-mail, and phone to let them know that they must register for the course to avoid suspension. The course starts the second week of classes so that all students have an opportunity to enroll in the course before it begins. If the student does not register for the course, they are suspended from the institution and the student is withdrawn from all other courses. Students are also suspended if they miss one class meeting of SAS. We refer to this course as one with "teeth" because there are extremely high consequences if a student misses SAS or fails to register for the course. The "teeth" is essential for this course to be effective because the "teeth" forces the students to take the course seriously. Other institutions that have required similar courses frequently have less stringent attendance requirements. Anecdotally, they have reported that without the "teeth" the model has been less successful.

Because this attendance policy is so heavily enforced, the Coordinator of the program attends each course the first day of SAS. The Coordinator explains the attendance policy and the consequences of missing SAS. Each student signs a contract indicating that the attendance policy is understood. Spring 2002 was the first semester in which regular visits by the Coordinator were made to each
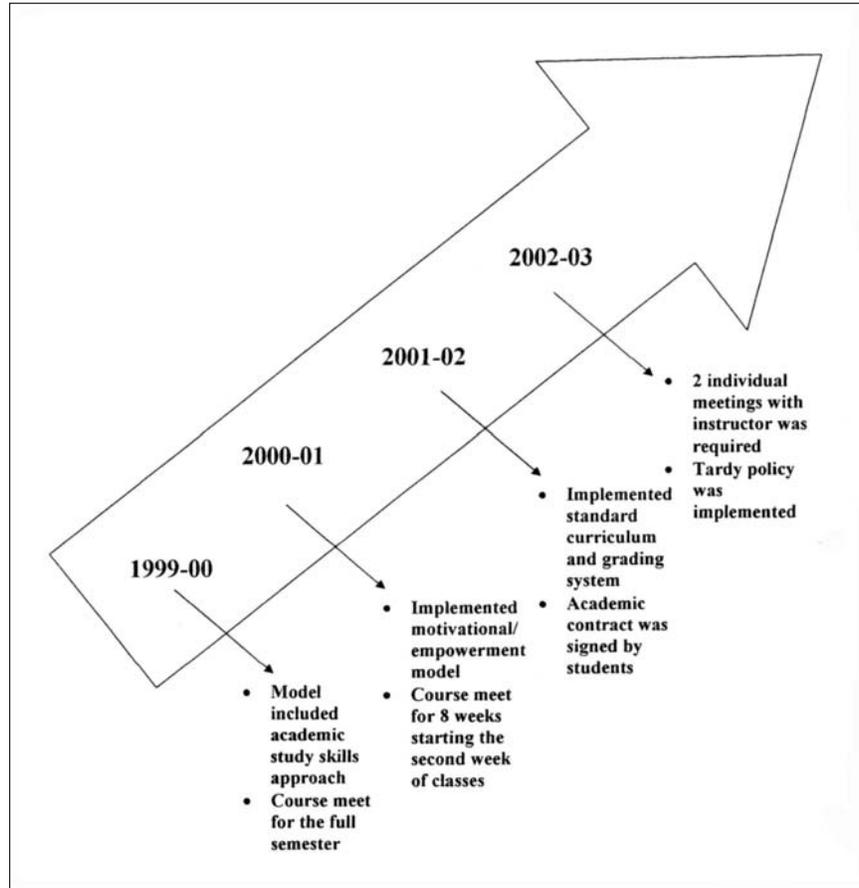
Figure 2. Timeline of the development of the Strategies for
Academic Success program.

section. As shown in Figure 3, the number of students suspended due to attendance violations decreased from 12 students to 7 students compared to the previous spring semester. An explanation of the attendance policy and having each student sign a physical contract seemed to decrease the attendance violations.

The SAS curriculum is implemented using Skip Downing's (2002) text *On Course: Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life.* This text was chosen because it covers the four key topic areas of the model: personal responsibility, positive affirmations, goal setting/life planning, and self-management. Students are required to complete weekly journals from *On Course* as well as to
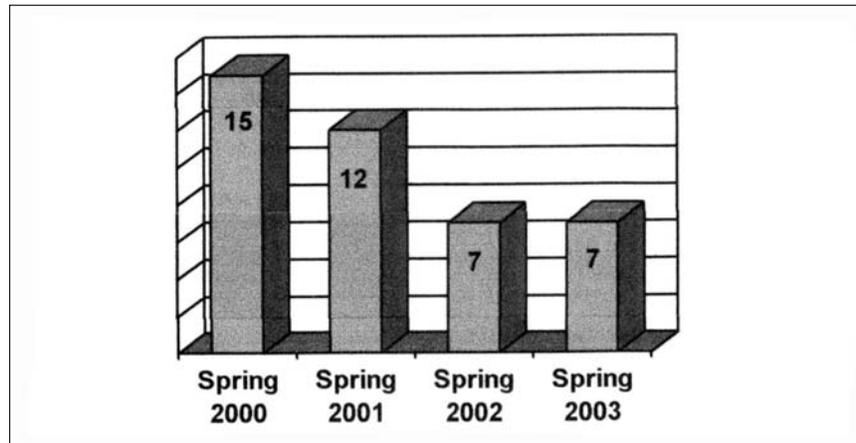
Figure 3. Spring suspensions due to attendance.

attend two instructor meetings throughout the eight-week period. Faculty, staff, graduate students, and adjunct instructors teach the course.

SUCCESS AND RESULTS OF THE MODEL

Students Enrolled in the Program

During the spring semester of 2003, there were 309 students enrolled in the SAS program comprising a comparable number of males and females (males = 156, females = 153). This balance of males and females is interesting considering that females make up 67.5% of the students population at UNCG. The SAS program is required for all students who are placed on academic probation after their first semester at UNCG; therefore, there was a mix of freshmen and upper-classmen in the program. The majority of the students were freshmen (65%), however 22.3% of the students were sophomores, 10.7% of the students were juniors, and 1.9% of the students were seniors. The distribution of ethnicity among students enrolled in the program mirrors that of the campus as a whole with 66.3% of the students classifying themselves as White, 22.0% as Black, 3.2% as Asian, 1.9% as Hispanic, .6% as Native American, 4.5% as another ethnicity not mentioned, and 1.3% were unknown. The age of the students enrolled in the program ranged from 18 to 49 with a mean age of 20.15 (SD = 3.367). The majority of the students lived on campus (n = 174, 58.6%) versus off campus (n = 123, 41.4%), and almost one-fifth of the students were undecided on a major (n = 59, 19.2%) the semester they were enrolled in the SAS program.

The students on academic probation that were enrolled in the SAS program were not predicted to perform poorly in college. On average, the students' high school GPA was 3.03 (SD = .447) and the mean SAT score for these students on academic probation was 992.29 (SD = 137.03) with a range from 470 to 1430. Their predicted GPA calculated by the Admissions staff when they were admitted was 2.30 on average (SD = .366). A GPA at or above a 2.0 is considered to be in good academic standing at UNCG; therefore, their predicted GPA was not a strong predictor of their academic performance during their first semester. The calculated predicted GPA contributes heavily to the Admissions' decision as to whether a student is admissible to UNCG, and comprises the student's high school GPA and SAT score. Furthermore, several of the students ranked high in their class rank in high school.

Results

On average, students were enrolled in 11.91 credit hours the semester before they were placed on academic probation. The next semester, which was the semester they were enrolled in the SAS program, the average credit hours they were enrolled in significantly decreased to 8.69 credit hours (t = 12.79, p = .000). This significant decrease in enrolled credit hours indicated that the students were making more realistic decisions regarding their academic schedule.

Retention Rates

Due to the change in curriculum and the implementation of the motivational model, our retention rates for these students have continued to increase each semester. The number of SAS students eligible to return to UNCG has increased from 40% during 1999-00 to 58% during 2002-03 (an 18 percentage point increase) (see Figure 4).

Comparison with Control Group

In order to measure the effectiveness of the program in terms of student academic achievement, a specific control group and experimental group were identified. The experimental group includes students who were on academic probation and were required to enroll in the SAS program during the spring 2003 semester, while the control group comprises students who were placed on freshmen warning during the spring 2003 semester but who were not required to enroll in the SAS program. The freshmen warning students had a GPA between a 1.50 and 1.75, whereas as the freshmen that were enrolled in the SAS program and were on academic probation had below a 1.5 GPA. The students on freshmen warning were purposefully chosen as a control group because they had a similar GPA, but were not required to participate in the SAS program. All the students' GPAs for the previous semester and the semester of the SAS intervention were
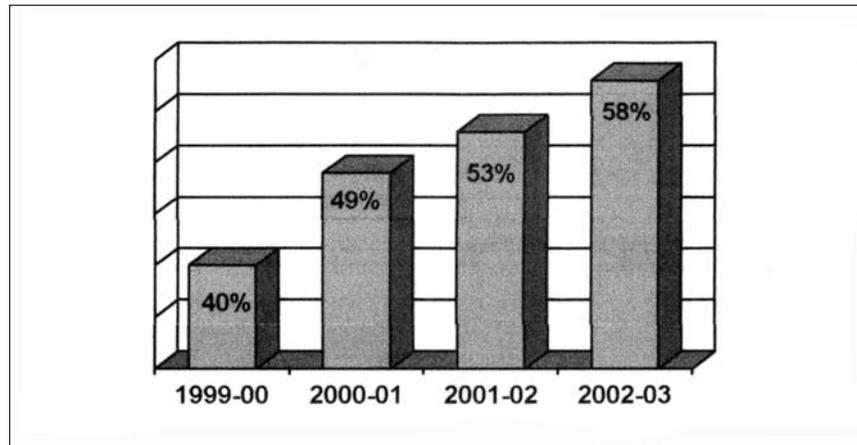
Figure 4. Retention results of the Strategies for
Academic Success program.

collected. The improvement, or gain, in the GPA (the second semester GPA minus the previous semester GPA) was calculated for both control and experimental groups. An independent *t*-test was conducted to compare the mean difference between the GPA gains for both the control and experimental groups at the .05 significance level. Since the two groups of students are similar in demographics, and had below a 2.0 GPA for the previous semester, it was hypothesized that there is no significant difference between the GPA gains for the two groups.

Three hundred seven students were in the SAS program, or experimental group, while 80 were in the control group. No sampling procedure was used, as these numbers comprise the entire UNCG population of both groups. Students enrolled in the program achieved a GPA gain of .7309, compared to the control group at .4202. The *t*-test result further confirmed that the mean difference between the GPA gains of the experimental and the control group is significant ($p = .036$). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected and it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the GPA gains between the two groups, and that students enrolled in the SAS program had a significantly higher academic achievement.

Additionally, a repeated measures design was used to explore the impact of the program across the 2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, and 2003-2004 academic years. Fall GPA and spring GPA served as pre- and posttest scores, and predicted GPA (a composite value constructed from verbal and math SAT scores and high school GPA used by the university to predict first-year student success) was treated as a covariate. Again, students on academic warning were used as a control group, whereas probation students were identified as a treatment group. The

difference in pre-GPA was statistically controlled for in this analysis, and the entire population of both groups for each academic year were used in the design. Results indicated that in the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 academic years, students in the treatment group had post-GPAs on a par with those of members of the control group. However, in the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 academic years, students in the treatment group earned statistically significantly higher GPAs than those in the control group, even after the difference in pre-GPA was taken into account. This significant difference is illustrated in Figure 5, which reflects the finding in the 2003-2004 academic year and shows that the estimated marginal means for SAS students are substantially greater than those students who were on academic warning and were not required to enroll in the program.

IMPLEMENTING THE MODEL AT OTHER INSTITUTIONS

The motivational/empowerment model described above can be easily adapted to fit any institution with similar attributes. The model works best in a probation program in which attendance is mandatory. The "teeth" in this program creates an atmosphere in which students take the course and the material presented seriously. In fact, some institutions that have implemented the model without the "teeth"
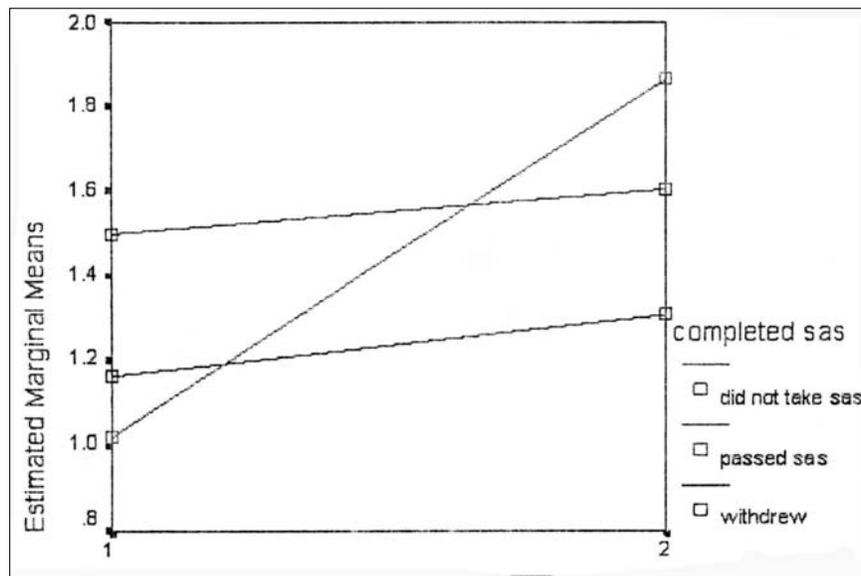

Figure 5. Repeated measures estimated marginal means
for 2003-2004 academic year.

have anecdotally reported to us minimal success and low attendance rates. Before other considerations regarding attendance are made, mandatory attendance needs to be taken into consideration. However, when mandatory attendance is not an option because of the institution's policies or mission, monitoring attendance in some way may be an alternative.

If your institution does not offer a special program for students on academic probation, proposing a course such as this may be an appropriate solution. It is important to gain the support of others before proposing and implementing a probation course. It is crucial to talk with stakeholders across campus that would have an investment in making a difference in the lives of probation students. Communicate with administrators about the implementation of the program, exploring issues such as who will be responsible for its daily operations and the sources of funding to pay course instructors. Research how courses are approved on your campus and the procedures you need to complete to offer a course.

Once the course is approved, it is important to start recruiting instructors to teach the various sections. Start with advising or counseling staff on your campus. Most likely staff are interested in gaining teaching experience and have the knowledge and background to teach this type of course successfully. In addition, recruit eager graduate students and faculty that want to make a difference in students' lives. Once instructors are recruited, it is important that at least a half-day training is in place to ensure all of the instructors are teaching similar content. Lastly, procedures need to be implemented to let students know they need to register for the course. Providing students with a deadline that they need to register for the course is important as well as following-up with students that have not registered.

The following are additional considerations when designing your own program to implement this model.

- What are you doing now and how well is it working?
- Will your course be offered for credit, and will attendance be mandatory?
- Who will teach the course?
- How will you sell it to your administration?
- Will you use the model presented here?
- What curriculum will you use? Will the curriculum have a lasting effect on the students?
- Who will be directly responsible for the program's day-to-day operation?
- How will you evaluate the program and its effectiveness?
- How will you deal with the difficult situations such as suspending students?

FURTHER RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The program described here can boast well-documented success. However, it has been developed as a result of careful assessment of the needs and culture of the

institution, examination of the research literature, consultation with experts from different areas, and willingness to experiment, measure, and document. Further, there is an institutional commitment to assisting students who go on academic probation, which is the central component to success in any effort to retain students who are academically underprepared. Before implementing a program for assisting students on academic probation, a careful examination of institutional resources, commitments, culture, and needs should be undertaken. A simple SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis is ideal to begin the process of building or reforming an enrollment management procedure (Dolence, Rowley, & LuJan, 1997). An effective SWOT analysis includes understanding the local organizational culture, identifying resources for students, setting the criteria to evaluate the plan, and establishing timelines.

There is a dearth of research regarding student academic probation. For example, most theories examining college student success were based on data drawn from traditional-aged, white, middle-class students. However, there are rapidly increasing numbers of students who are natives of the United States but who are not members of the majority culture and for whom English is a second language. The impact of culture is largely unexamined in the literature regarding college student academic success. There are also growing numbers of adult students who find themselves on academic probation. There are also likely to be great differences among the needs of students who are the products of rural or urban areas, or who are commuters rather than residential students. There is a need for investigation into how intervention strategies should be modified for each of these demographic groups.

CONCLUSION

This motivational/empowerment model supports student success and retention while improving the overall experience of the student. Specifically, the results provide evidence of the direct impact on the percentage of students eligible to continue as well as students' grade point average. Not only does this model provide evidence of increased retention, it also allows students to gain life-long skills. This model can be implemented on any campus, regardless of the demographics or size. We recommend requiring attendance and applying the "teeth" to this model when used with students on academic probation.

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