

Successful Transition Off Academic Probation: A Qualitative Analysis

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the factors that helped contribute to a successful transition off academic probation for MacEwan University students, to better understand the existing resources that have been useful for helping with the transition, and to explore other resources or strategies that could be helpful for a successful transition. Focus groups were conducted with MacEwan University students who were enrolled in any of the main faculties/schools and who had successfully transitioned off academic probation. Results showed that students attributed their success to taking time off from university, changing programs, or personal growth. Students did not utilize MacEwan University support services once placed on academic probation and navigated the experience on their own. Students were reluctant to seek support because they felt embarrassment and shame. Recommendations by students for MacEwan University to implement include changing the administrative procedures to a more supportive approach. Specifically, the notification letter should include resources available for students and contact information with an advisor to set up a meeting. Overall, students emphasized the importance of personal contact with university staff to help understand academic probation and the steps it would take to successfully transition off.

*Keywords:* academic probation, student success, post-secondary student, supports

### Successful Transition Off Academic Probation: A Qualitative Analysis

Academic probation is a designation colleges and universities use to indicate that a student is not meeting specific Grade Point Average (GPA) requirements. According to MacEwan University policy, students are put on academic probation for one academic year if they achieve a GPA below 2.00 from the previous academic year, regardless of the amount of credits attempted (MacEwan, 2017). More specifically, a student's GPA is first assessed after the Spring term and once more after the Winter term, which is a full academic year. If a student has a GPA of less than 2.00 after the Winter term, they are placed on probation until the end of the next Winter term. In order to be taken off academic probation and regain good standing, a student must achieve a GPA of 2.0 or higher at the end of the next academic year. However, if a student's GPA falls to less than 1.3 after one year of being on academic probation, that student will be Required to Withdraw (RTW) from the institution for a period of 12 months. This policy is generally consistent across universities and colleges in Canada (e.g., University of British Columbia, 2017; University of Toronto, 2017; and Concordia University Montréal, 2017).

Academic probation can be seen as a transition period between unsatisfactory performance and regaining good academic standing or between unsatisfactory performance and institutional withdrawal – depending on how the student fares (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011). As a transition period, it is ultimately intended to help students raise their GPA by acting as a warning signal to indicate that it is necessary to change current university work habits. Unfortunately, most students on academic probation do not meet the necessary academic expectations to regain good standing and are dismissed from their institutions, representing 25% of all departures (Houle, 2013). Graham & James (2010) found retention rates of students on academic probation at a Canadian university to be particularly low. Of the 969 students who were placed on

academic probation between 2006 and 2007, only 348 returned the next fall.

Research has shown that students generally do not respond well when they are placed on academic probation (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011; Barouch-Gilbert, 2016; Houle, 2013). Barouch-Gilbert (2016) interviewed 13 former probationary students in an effort to explore students' experiences and levels of self-efficacy during academic probation. Students shared that they faced constant struggles throughout academic probation and their beliefs in their academic capabilities were often undermined (Barouch-Gilbert, 2016). Students tend to view academic probation as a failure and this negatively affects their self-beliefs that they can be academically successful (Barouch-Gilbert, 2016). However, students' self-beliefs can be enhanced when they receive support and encouragement from friends, family, and faculty (Barouch-Gilbert, 2016; Houle, 2013).

Seirup & Rose (2010) also examined the impact of self-belief, specifically self-rated levels of hope, on academic success among 235 probationary students. Hope can be defined as a motivational belief system that affects goal setting and perceptions of future success (Seirup & Rose, 2010). The students were enrolled in a mandatory online course designed to facilitate academic skills to improve GPAs and were asked to complete the Dispositional Hope Scale to measure levels of hope. Results showed students who completed the course were more likely to be retained and those with high-hope showed the greatest overall gain in GPAs (Seirup & Rose, 2010).

The emotional responses to being placed on academic probation can be profound. Houle (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with five students on academic probation and students expressed that they felt shame, embarrassment, and humiliation. The shame of being on academic probation was so humiliating that most students did not share their reality with anyone.

As a result, students felt alone and disconnected from the support of their peers as well as academic professionals (Houle, 2013). Similarly, Arcand & Leblanc (2011) conducted in-depth interviews with five undergraduate probationary students and found that students mentioned feeling lonely, overwhelmed, and disconnected from the university after being placed on academic probation (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011).

Students expressed that communication with an advisor helped them feel more confident about what they needed to do in order to regain good academic standing (Houle, 2013). Lindsey (2000) also found that individual attention and ongoing monitoring were viewed as critical by academic administrators. This can contribute to developing rapport with students, which increases the likelihood that students will seek further assistance (Lindsey, 2000).

Since the reasons students are on academic probation vary, finding effective support programs has been an ongoing challenge. However, some typical interventions that have been employed include advising, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and/or course work. For example, some universities offer support programs to provide probationary students with tools and strategies to help raise their GPA. Advisors at the University of Arizona implemented a mandatory success course for 154 freshman students on academic probation (McGrath & Burd, 2012). The course consisted of lessons on student development, test-taking, note-taking strategies, campus policies, exploration of different majors, and engagement with faculty members or advisors. Students were also required to meet with their advisors and visit student services. The results showed improvements in students' GPAs, whereby 49% of students who took the course managed to regain good academic standing (McGrath & Burd, 2012).

In another study, researchers implemented a voluntary learning course where participants met twice a week for one hour over three weeks (Renzulli, 2015). The lessons included self-

regulation strategies, study skills, note-taking strategies, and how to develop personal study plans. Of the nine probationary students who participated, seven students were able to increase their GPAs (Renzulli, 2015). Mann, Hunt, and Alford (2003) also implemented a successful intervention program for 92 academic probation students consisting of lessons on similar learning skills, such as time management, note-taking, and exam anxiety. The results were also promising and students showed an increase in their GPAs after taking the course (Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2003). Houle (2013) found student success largely depended upon the amount of time they devoted to studying, their ability to stay organized, their time management skills, and their ability to manage distractions. Programs that focus on building these skills for probationary students have shown to be successful (Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2003; McGrath & Burd, 2012; Renzulli, 2015).

Despite these programs showing positive results, probationary students may be reluctant to participate in voluntary courses or programs. Some studies have reported that only 10 to 25% of probationary students elect to join a support program (Damashek, 2003). Furthermore, it has been shown that students who are most in need of services are least likely to seek support (Lindsey, 2000). Therefore, voluntary programs that aim to help these students might not be the most effective.

MacEwan University offers a variety of support services that can help students overcome barriers to their academic success including advising services, a writing and learning center, student peer support, and counseling services. The present study aims to gain a better understanding of successful transitioned students' experiences with these services as well as their views on other factors that helped with their successful transition. Specifically, the three main exploratory research questions examined in the study are: *What factors contribute to the*

*successful transition off probation? How helpful are the existing resources MacEwan offers to students on probation? And what other resources or strategies could students benefit from to help with a successful transition?*

### **Method**

The research questions used to guide this study were best answered using qualitative methods. Specifically, focus groups were conducted to explore students' perspectives on what helped them transition off probation. There are many advantages for using qualitative methods for exploratory research. First, qualitative methods report on the voices of participants and help provide a more complex understanding of a topic from the multiple perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2016). Second, most qualitative studies focus on a small group of participants to gain a deeper understanding of a topic (Creswell, 2016). Focus groups specifically aim to involve a small group of participants because bigger groups are difficult to manage and the discussions may not be as detailed due to time constraints (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Third, qualitative research is explorative and open-ended. The open-ended nature of questions found in focus groups allows researchers to interact directly with participants, providing the opportunity for clarification on responses, probing questions, and follow-up questions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Focus groups also provide the space for participants to talk through their responses without rigid constraints and allows unpredictable aspects of the topic to arise from the flow of discussion (Creswell, 2016; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Participants are also able to react to and build on the responses of other group members (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015).

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were undergraduate students at MacEwan University enrolled in a program in any of the main faculties/school and who had successfully transitioned off

academic probation. To recruit participants, an invitation was sent by email through each of the faculties/schools' student newsletter (see Appendix A). If the faculty did not have a student newsletter (e.g., Faculty of Nursing), an invitation was posted to blackboard as an informational item via the general administrative unit. The invitation outlined the study and asked interested volunteers to contact the researcher via email. In addition to the newsletter invitations, posters advertising the study were placed in high-volume areas on campus (see Appendix B). The time and date of the focus sessions were set to accommodate the availability of the greatest number of respondents possible within any faculty to a maximum of 8 students in a focus group session.

The researcher conducted five focus groups with students. Four focus groups consisted of three students in each and the last focus group consisted of five students, which brought the total sample size to 17 students. Of the 17 students, five were male and 12 were female.

The focus groups were conducted at the City Centre Campus of MacEwan University in the Sociology focus group room and each lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. They were semi-structured in nature with pre-arranged essential questions and a series of follow-up questions that were selected for use depending on the responses provided by participants (see Appendix C). Focus groups were all recorded with a digital audio recorder and participants were notified that a recorder would be used when voluntary consent was obtained.

### **Procedure**

Upon arrival at the scheduled location, participants were asked to take a seat around the meeting table. The researcher introduced herself to the participants and gave a brief overview of the intended purpose of the study. The researcher then provided the participants with a consent form and went over it in detail. Participants were asked to read through the consent form, and following this, were asked if they needed any clarification or had any questions and concerns.



The signed consent forms were then collected and the gift cards were handed out. The researcher emphasized that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time and still keep the gift card. All of the students participated until the end of each session.

The researcher explained that since participants may know each other, anonymity could not be guaranteed. The researcher reiterated the importance of keeping all the comments shared in the room confidential and to not repeat any of the information outside of the focus group session. The researcher also emphasized that pseudonyms will be used for the report to protect their identity. The researcher asked the participants if they understood and if they had any questions regarding confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher then distributed confidentiality agreements and asked the participants to sign the confidentiality statement (Note: this did not guarantee that participants did not disclose information that was discussed in the session, but did reinforce the importance of confidentiality).

The researcher provided an overview of how the session would be conducted. The researcher began by asking one person a question. After that person had a chance to respond, the researcher provided an overview of how the session would be conducted. The researcher began by asking one person a question. After that person had a chance to respond, the person to his or her right was asked if he or she wanted to provide a response to that question. The order continued in a clock-wise manner until all of the participants have had a chance to respond (if they wished to do so). Participants were encouraged to participate even if their associates already gave similar responses to a statement. After everyone had a chance to provide comments, the researcher asked the group as a whole if anyone would like to add further to discussion at this point. Once comments on that topic have come to a close, the researcher then began with a different individual and the process continued in the same fashion with the researcher posing the

second question. Participants were also reminded that the session would be audiotaped and that the researcher would be taking notes as the session progresses.

The researcher then started the voice recorder to signal the start of the session. The researcher began the session by asking the first question: *What do you think helped you transition off academic probation?* After everyone gave their responses and shared their opinions, the researcher asked the next main question: *Were there any support services of any kind that helped you transition off academic probation that you can tell us about?* Next, the researcher asked follow-up questions: *Can you identify any services at MacEwan that were helpful to your successful transition off of probation? In what ways were they helpful? Were some more helpful than others? (And if so, how so?) If you didn't use any of MacEwan's services, can you explain why not?* Then, the researcher asked the third main question: *Do you have any ideas for other resources or services (that exist or don't currently exist) that you might help students with a successful transition?* The next questions were: *Did you meet with your advisor after being placed on academic probation?* In which the next two follow-up questions were: *How did your advisor help you understand your situation?* And *If you did not meet with an advisor after you were placed on probation, can you explain why not?* The next question was: *Have you done anything differently since transitioning off of probation?* After students answered this, the researcher prompted students with these follow-up questions: *What are your study habits like now?* And *How have your study habits changed since being on academic probation?* The last two questions were: *What do you think the university could be doing differently regarding students on academic probation?* And finally, *if you were to offer advice to a student who was just placed on academic probation, what would it be?* When the last participant gave his response and the final discussion came to a close, the researcher shut off the tape recorder to

signal the end of the session.

Participants were thanked for their participation and were encouraged to contact the researcher at any time if they had any questions about the focus group or if they wished to discuss anything else related to their participation. Participants were given duplicated copies of the consent forms that contained the researcher's contact information. Then, the researcher reiterated the importance of not disclosing the information shared in the session outside of the focus group. Finally, the researcher once again thanked the participants for their time, and the session came to a close.

### **Data Analysis**

Once focus groups were completed, the audio recordings were carefully transcribed by the researcher. The researcher did not transcribe focus groups verbatim. However, responses that were viewed as important and on topic were recorded verbatim. Responses that were not consistent with the research questions were sometimes not included or were loosely transcribed. The researcher highlighted important key words and phrases for each of the main six focus group questions, which were also color coded according to each question to help organize the analysis. The responses to the six main questions and sub-questions were open coded for general themes that related to the three main research questions as stated in the introduction.

### **Results**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the factors that contributed to a successful transition off academic probation, to better understand the existing resources that were useful for helping students, and to explore student recommendations for new resources or strategies.

The data for this study were collected using responses from five focus groups of students

who were currently enrolled in a program at MacEwan University and who had successfully transitioned off academic probation. Certain themes emerged from the focus groups including: Factors Contributing to Successful Transition, Existing Resources Used at MacEwan, and Recommendations for New Resources or Strategies. Each theme is described in more detail in Table 1 below. All of the names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

Table 1

*Themes and coding*

<b>Themes and Descriptions</b>
<b>Factors Contributing to Successful Transition</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Took time off</li> <li>• Personal growth</li> <li>• Changed programs</li> <li>• Support from family/friends</li> <li>• Changed perspective on school</li> </ul>
<b>Existing Resources Used at MacEwan</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselor after transition</li> <li>• Advisor</li> <li>• Social worker</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional Consequences of Academic Probation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Embarrassment</li> <li>• Self-blame</li> <li>• Fear of judgment</li> <li>• Failure</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendations for New Resources or Strategies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link resources/options on notification letter</li> <li>• Have representative contact student</li> <li>• Schedule advisor meeting</li> <li>• Follow up email</li> <li>• Buddy system with former probationary students</li> </ul>

**Factors Contributing to Successful Transition**

Despite each student's unique situation, there were key factors that most students agreed

contributed to their successful transition off probation. Specifically, most students shared that taking time off from school and changing programs, personal growth, support from family and friends, changing social circles, and changing their perspective on school were most important factors that helped with transitioning off probation.

Five of the students stated taking time off from school and entering a new program helped them to succeed. Ashley shared:

I didn't know what I wanted. It was on my part. I took a year off. I worked and it was embarrassing because my parents were like "well, what are you going to do now"? It was more like, oh crap, what is my plan? What am I going to do? I didn't get a lot of help in that aspect...so I just worked two jobs and found the program that I'm currently in. It was through a mutual friend that told me about the program...It also helped to get family support...like they said I'm still in university even though I got on probation and I still have a chance to get off. And they said "well, take the chance"!

Daniel shared that surrounding himself with students who were on probation in the past and were now succeeding helped him become more motivated with school. He shared that by meeting other students who went through the same struggles as he did allowed him to believe that he could also overcome his challenges. He stated:

I started pushing myself and started surrounding myself with people who were motivating to be around. That really helped me. After being on probation twice, that really kicked me into my ways. Now I'm doing well and working for scholarships.... It was more about the people who I met, other students, who worked hard and were doing well. So I thought I know I can do well if I put the work in...so I had to figure out how to motivate myself.

Out of the students who took time off, most shared that it was themselves who decided to come back to school and were told about new programs through friends or discovered them on their own. Jaclyn shared:

I also took a year off. But then I worked for a really amazing company who gave me a bunch of leadership opportunities and I was volunteering at the time. For me, I decided on my own that it was time to go back...I took a year off and one of my friends randomly asked me to hang out, and she was in her 4<sup>th</sup> year in the program (Child and Youth Care). And she told me I would be good for this program and I immediately registered. I didn't know it existed before.

Other students attributed personal growth, maturity, and self-motivation to their success.

Alissa shared that her transition was contributed to personal growth:

A lot of things were affecting my performance. I had a lot of personal growth to do. I was going from rural to a big city and I didn't even know what I wanted to take n in university. Life experience helped and working in different areas. Conversations weren't happening about these things with advisors or anything

### **Existing Resources Used at MacEwan**

With the exception of one student, none of the students utilized resources that MacEwan University offered right after they were placed on probation. However, most students did use resources once they were off probation. From the discussions, it seemed that once students began succeeding, they felt comfortable enough to access services and resources offered at the university. Students also shared that they utilized advising services after they switched programs and needed help navigating new courses. Two students who switched into the Child and Youth Care program from the Arts faculty credited the small program size for the positive support from advisors and counsellors. Jaclyn said:

I saw an advisor after for some of my classes...she helped me work through my courses. My advisor was really good with being nonjudgmental and she was like "it's ok! Let's figure it out"! After I came back, I saw a counsellor and they made feel so much more secure about my studies...For me, our program is really encouraging. It's really difficult to do poorly in Child and Youth Care. It's very tight knit. I feel like it would have been different if I went into Arts.

Meryana, who also transferred into the Child and Youth Care program, reiterated the sentiment that her advisor was helpful after switching into the new program:

I've seen an advisor in my program, Charlene. She's kind of the main lady in there. And asked me about what electives I need because I was on probation. She helped me...we went through my old transcript...so we kind of worked to see which elective I should take and which would be best for me...I see a counselor now. That's really helped...to get help not just academically, but personally. I started like a year ago. And that's helped with school anxiety, personal anxiety.

Students in other programs also credited their advisors, counselling services, and Students with Disabilities (SSD) for helping them. Robert, who also changed programs and is now enrolled in

the School of Business, shared that an advisor made things a lot easier for him by providing options of what he should do to prepare himself to ease back into school. Laura and Samantha also shared that the free counselling that MacEwan University offers was very important for them. In addition to counselling, some students also claimed that services offered by SSD have been helpful for them.

To better understand the barriers probationary student's face from seeking help, the researcher explored the reasons why students were not accessing resources or services at MacEwan University right after being placed on probation. Many of the students shared that they were not aware of the services the university offered. Moreover, those students who were aware of services, such as advising services, did not think those services could have helped them in their situation at that time. Students placed blame on themselves and believed the university could not help them. Most students claimed that embarrassment and self-blame for being placed on probation prevented them from seeking help. Meryana said:

I was so embarrassed. I was so upset. I put it on myself. You didn't try hard enough, you didn't go to your classes, you should have asked for help, talked to an advisor. But the feeling was so engrained that I didn't want to.

Laura similarly explained:

I didn't access services the first time I was on probation. It was like I made this bed, now I'm going to sleep in it. I needed to punish myself for putting myself in that position. So I didn't really think I deserved the help.

Dale shared the same feelings of placing the blame on himself:

I didn't know much about it [probation]. It was an onus on myself. I just needed to figure out how to motivate myself and figure out why I was in university. Whereas other people have completely different situations.

Robert also explained his reasons for not seeking help were because he felt it was his own problem to deal with:

It goes back to the whole shaming part. It's almost like you don't want deal with it. You hope it blows over. It's also like you'd rather try to fix it yourself because you did it yourself. No one else can help you... no one can write the test for you.

Another common thread for why students were not accessing resources was that they simply did not know about them. Ashley elaborated on this point by explaining her reason for not seeing an advisor:

I didn't even know there were resources. I didn't even know you could do that. I basically placed it [probation] on myself...when I was considering switching my minor, that was the only reason I why I went. I didn't even know we had counsellors we could talk to. At the end of the letter, it said to call this number for questions, but I didn't want to call them. I wouldn't even know what to say. Like I said, I had to go search what academic probation was...I felt like the university was shaming me...let get out of university, we don't want you here. I didn't feel helped at all.

Candice also claimed that not knowing about the resources prevented her from seeking help:

I don't think it's a lack of resources here, it's a lack of knowing what's available. I think MacEwan is doing enough for providing services, but I feel like the stigma we have, will make us not want to seek support either. The process has been shaming, and uncomfortable, I had to prove that I actually needed the help. They need to provide more information to students and not just in Arts and Sciences where most students are. The school needs to know there is an array for being on probation and just involving students more in the process instead of just sending a letter.

She went on to say that:

Academic probation, they leave you high and dry. They send you an email. I didn't know what to do. I knew it... wasn't good. There wasn't any support offered. I didn't know we had counseling services. I didn't even know we had a doctor's office. Or learning center. I didn't know.

It seemed that most students were simply unaware of the services available to them.

Furthermore, those students who were aware of services were unclear of the extent of the support and how it could have helped them in their specific situation. Embarrassment, shame, and self-blame played a powerful role in preventing students from fully seeking support. It was only until students started succeeding in university that they utilized services. Students who did utilize resources at MacEwan University after transitioning off probation felt that those services provided support and assurance that they could succeed.



### **Emotional Consequences of Academic Probation**

All of the students experienced negative emotional responses after being placed on probation. The most frequently shared feelings among students were embarrassment, shame, fear of judgement, and feeling lost. One student claimed that shock and embarrassment after being placed on probation led her to question her identity because she thought of herself as smart her whole life:

I was in such a shock when I got the letter. I didn't even know what probation was. After my first semester, I missed a final, it was a bunch of bad luck and I wasn't in a program that I loved. I felt lost and like I was doing nothing. I felt like I was working towards nothing. I withdrew from all my classes half way and moved out of the province to get myself out of the negative stress zone. [Probation] was a big part of the reason why I moved because my whole identity was "yeah, I'm super smart and I love school and I'm going to do awesome and I'm going to succeed". And I realized it wasn't easy and I didn't know what I wanted to do. So my identity changed quite drastically after receiving that letter. I didn't want to come back to MacEwan because I was so embarrassed.

Shame was a constant word that was repeated throughout all of the focus groups. Sam described her feelings of shame:

I felt a lot of shame. I did so well my first few years. Then I felt panicked. I was in university to move on with my life. Then I was really panicked and ashamed. I questioned how far have I fallen? I didn't want to tell my parents or friends. When people ask me why my degree was taking so long, I just say health reasons. It was a lot of shame and embarrassment. And to seek out supports at MacEwan is embarrassing too. It's like do they really want me here if I'm not doing well? A lot of that is my own feelings that I was projecting.

Alissa described that it felt like her world was crashing down:

It felt like my world crashed down. I was doing well in high school. I got the letter and panicked and immediately switched programs. It was awful because that letter didn't really say anything else. No next steps. Nothing about what you can explore.

Students also mentioned that they did not want to share that they were placed on probation with anyone for fear of being judged. Ashley explained that she felt like she was in her "own little bubble". Vanessa said that she was worried what her parents would think so she hid it from them. Malorie agreed with this fear, stating:

I had the same fear. What would my parents think? Or my friends and family? You know you're not stupid...so you think what is the issue? What needs to get better? What needs to get out of my life to make this better?

Laura also said that she hid her probation from everyone explaining that she was “mortified, ashamed, and hid it from everyone like it was a dirty secret”. Students also felt that receiving the notification letter made them feel like a failure. One student shared that when she just sees the word probation, “it just screams failure”. The majority of students kept their probation to themselves, especially from family and friends. They were fearful that they would lose respect and experience the negative stigma attached to being perceived as a failure.

### **Recommendations for New Resources or Strategies**

One of the last questions the researcher asked students was to provide ideas for new resources or strategies to implement at MacEwan. Most responses revolved around the initial notification email that states they have been placed on probation. Students felt this letter was impersonal and failed to provide adequate information on what next steps students should take (see Appendix D). Students offered specific recommendations for what should be included in the letter. Jaclyn suggested the letter should state that someone will be in contact with the student to set up a meeting. She explained having a more supportive approach instead of simply listing the facts would be more helpful:

There can be something that says someone will be in contact with you to set up a meeting. Like sitting down with someone... and they can ask you what do you like, is this program the right fit for you, what's going on with you right now, instead of it being like you're doing bad in school... it can be how can we support you to succeed. Like having that approach.

Ashley agreed with this suggestion but went further and recommended someone actually call the student:

I think somebody should be calling. Like having that personal connection with the university instead of a screen and you're looking at these words that have little to no context and are just straightforward and to the point. You feel shamed. You put that on yourself. Rather than having someone on the phone saying “I see that you've been put on academic probation, I would like to

set up an appointment so we can improve your situation and help you succeed” that’s a lot more positive.

Students emphasized personal connection as being an important factor to reach students to make a change. Madison elaborated that the letter makes you feel like just a number and that a meeting would help make it more personal. Alissa explained that instead of a “blanket letter”, having someone go over that letter with students to find out what the problem was would be helpful. She also shared that having a human connection would have helped her.

Another recommendation was providing a follow-up email. Students felt the initial letter was generally overwhelming and was usually met with shock. Katrina said that when she received the letter, she wasn’t paying attention to anything except for the fact that she was placed on probation so a follow-up email would be more effective:

When you get the letter, you’re not paying attention to anything else except that you’re on probation. So having a follow up letter might be better. Even though its hard to face an advisor, sometimes it’s good to have something tell you and make you face it. Sometimes you need a comforting voice to let you know its okay

Justin and Madison also suggested a follow-up email to notify students when they are off academic probation would also be beneficial and motivating for students.

Finally, students suggested the letter should simply list out the resources offered at MacEwan instead of leaving students to navigate the process on their own. Malorie shared:

There should be something that says there are services here to help you. Because the letter I received, I just thought like ok well...what options do I have? And you sit there struggling, thinking, ok what do I do?

Robert offered similar suggestions:

The actual letter when you are on probation should have options instead of just facts. Like as a student, you know you aren’t doing well. You know your marks. Even attaching a phone number to talk to an advisor, even just saying you should reach out to an advisor or peer support. I felt like that would have helped me in my first year instead of helping myself on my own.

Another student shared she didn't think an advisor would have helped her at the time. She suggested talking to another student who was in her program and previously on probation would have been more beneficial for her. She shared knowing someone who succeeded after being placed on probation would have been more effective.

Generally, students stated that making a connection with an advisor through a meeting or phone call, listing out resources on the initial letter, providing a follow-up letter stating students successfully transitioned off probation, and perhaps creating a buddy system would all be helpful solutions.

### **Discussion**

Every student experiencing difficulty in university faces unique challenges and experiences. This study did not seek to address the reasons *why* students were placed on academic probation. Rather, the aim of the study focused on exploring students' views on what factors helped them transition off probation, what existing resources they utilized, and ideas for new resources or strategies MacEwan University could implement.

In terms of factors contributing to a successful transition, students shared that support from family, friends, counselors, and advisors helped them find the motivation to continue their studies and contributed to their success. Barouch-Gilbert (2016) found that students' self-beliefs that they could succeed academically were enhanced when they received support and encouragement. In addition, it has been shown that students who receive support from academic advising services perform better academically (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001).

However, after being placed on probation, students often kept their probation a secret. It wasn't until students started succeeding that they were able to share their experiences with university staff, family, or friends. Most students shared that they did not utilize resources at

MacEwan University after being placed on probation. As part of the exploration of why students were not using these resources, the findings showed negative emotional responses, such as embarrassment and shame, prevented them from doing so. Damashek (2003) found probationary students to be reluctant to participate in support programs. Additionally, it was also shown that students who are most in need of services are least likely to seek support (Lindsey, 2000).

MacEwan students shared that they felt embarrassment, shame, and fear of judgment after being on placed probation. Moreover, students shared that being placed on probation made them feel like failures and forced them to question if university was right for them. Previous research has also shown students often described being on academic probation in negative terms; for example, feeling like a failure, an embarrassment, shame, and feeling depressed (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011; Barouch-Gilbert, 2016; Houle, 2013). Students mostly emphasized the need for more communication with advisors to form a personal or human connection. Houle (2013) and Lindsey (2000) also found that communication with an advisor, individual attention, and ongoing monitoring were important for students to achieve success.

As part of the recommendations for MacEwan University to implement, students placed an emphasis on changing the initial notification letter because it was too impersonal and did not provide enough information on resources. Graham & James (2010) also found initial probation letters to be problematic for the same reasons (impersonal and no information). Also, students shared that having contact with an advisor would have encouraged and motivated them to succeed during a vulnerable time. It has been found that students who face academic jeopardy desire stronger structure and direction from their institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study included some notable limitations. Focus groups were small due to the difficulty of recruiting students who had successfully transitioned off probation but were still attending MacEwan University. Many students who expressed their interest to participate but could not be included in the study were those who were either still on probation or those who had low GPAs but were not formally placed on academic probation. Also, because the criteria included only those who were currently attending MacEwan University, those students who successfully transitioned off probation and switched universities could not have been included. Focus group sessions took place during a busy month when students were preparing for final assignments and exams, which also contributed to small focus groups. In order to run focus sessions with groups of students who had successfully transitioned off probation and who could meet at the same time, it was necessary to have small focus groups.

Another limitation is that the sample was restricted to students who transitioned off probation. It is not clear whether the same resources or factors that promoted success in this sample would also work for students who have yet to succeed.

Future research could expand the sample size by extending the study to include those who successfully transitioned off probation and have already graduated from MacEwan University. Also, the inclusion criteria could also include those who are currently on academic probation in order to see if those students share similar concerns and issues as those who successfully transition off probation. Finally, future research could also include those students who were forced to withdraw from the institution to see what factors were present during their struggles to overcome academic probation.

### **Conclusion**

Academic probation negatively impacts vulnerable students who do not typically seek or receive help. Support from family, friends, counselors, and advisors were all important for students to achieve success. Most students did not utilize any of MacEwan's support services after being placed on probation, stating that emotional barriers such as embarrassment and shame prevented them from doing so. To improve the current procedure for dealing with students who are placed on academic probation, the university could begin by evaluating how the notification letter is written and to include information on resources that the university offers. Since it was shown that students did not seek support, the letter could also include a request for the student to set up a meeting with a specific advisor. Meeting with an advisor once a student is placed on probation and working on a plan together would provide accountability and a clear understanding of what needs to be done to achieve success.

Overall, personal contact with someone who is supportive and non-judgmental is a crucial factor for students' achieving success. Furthermore, the university should take the first initiative to set up a meeting and promote personal contact because probationary students are not seeking support on their own. Adding more humanity into the administrative process could be the deciding factor for the student who drops out or continues on with their education.

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## Appendix A

## Invitation to participate in study

Hello,

My name is Lori Giampa and I am a sociology major at MacEwan University. I am conducting a research project on the experiences of students who have successfully transitioned off of academic probation. I'm interested to hear from students who have transitioned off of probation to gain a better understanding of factors and resources that contribute to success. Your comments, opinions, and responses are very valuable to this research project and they may contribute to the improvement of resources to help other students transition off academic probation. I invite you to join a focus group session where 6-8 students who have successfully transitioned off academic probation while at MacEwan will share their views on factors and resources that contributed to their success. A \$10-dollar gift certificate will be provided to you at the beginning of the session in appreciation of your time.

If you are interested, please contact me at [giampal2@mymacewan.ca](mailto:giampal2@mymacewan.ca) Please note that the time and date will be set to best accommodate the potential participants. Thank you for your time.

## Appendix B

Poster used to advertise study at MacEwan University

**HAVE YOU BEEN**  
**ON ACADEMIC PROBATION?**

We want to hear from you!

**FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS NEEDED**

Your opinions are important and very valuable to this project and they may contribute to the improvement of resources at MacEwan. Please email me (Lori) at

[GIAMPAL2@MYMACEWAN.CA](mailto:GIAMPAL2@MYMACEWAN.CA).

THANK YOU! ☺

**\$10 GIFT CERTIFICATE**  
provided at the session

## Appendix C

## Focus Group Guide

1. Given your personal experiences with academic probation, what do you think helped you succeed or getting off probation?
  - Can you think of anything else that helped you?

Now we are going to talk about some of the existing resources at MacEwan to see if you've used them to help you in some way.

2. Were there any support services of any kind that helped you transition off academic probation that you can tell us about?
  - Can you identify any services at MacEwan that were helpful to your successful transition off of probation?
  - In what ways were they helpful?
  - Were some more helpful than others? (And if so, how?)
  - If you didn't use any of MacEwan's services, can you explain why not?
3. Do you have any ideas for other resources or services (that exist or don't currently exist) that you think might help students with a successful transition?
4. Did you meet with an advisor after being placed on academic probation?
  - How did an advisor help you understand your situation?
  - If you did not meet with an advisor after you were placed on probation, can you explain why not?
5. Have you done anything differently since transitioning off of probation?
  - What are your study habits like now?
  - How have your study habits changed since being on academic probation?
6. What do you think the university could be doing differently regarding students on academic probation?
7. If you were to offer advice to a student who was just placed on academic probation, what would it be?

## Appendix D

## MacEwan University academic probation letter, 2015

&lt;DATE&gt;

&lt;STUDENT NAME&gt;

RE: ACADEMIC STANDING REVIEW (POLICY C2070)

MacEwan University reviews students' Academic Standing three times a year, at the end of each term (i.e., fall, winter, spring/summer). Academic Standing is defined as the scholastic standing of students based on their grade point average (GPA).

I am writing to advise you that following a review of your Academic Standing for the **Fall** Term of the **2015-2016** academic year, you have been placed on Academic Probation, as your GPA is below 2.0. Your transcript will include a notation of 'Academic Probation' at the end of the term record.

You are required to achieve satisfactory academic standing, defined as a GPA of 2.0 or better, in your next enrolled term to regain Good Standing. In addition, your program may require you to fulfill additional conditions. If your program has such requirements, you will receive a follow-up letter explaining those conditions. Failure to achieve satisfactory academic standing or fulfill any additional requirements from your program may result in being Required to Withdraw from your program.

If you have outstanding grades, incomplete grades or have deferred exams – your academic standing will be reviewed again once we receive those final grades. If you have questions or believe there is an error regarding your Academic Standing, please contact your program area.

If you feel there are grounds for appealing this decision, please refer to Policy E3103 – Student Appeals for information on the appeal process. Appeals are to be delivered to the Chair of your program no later than twenty (20) working days from the date of this letter.

I wish you all the best as you work towards achieving your academic goals.

Sincerely

&lt;REGISTRAR CONTACT&gt;

Associate Registrar, Records and Registration