Guide for Advising Students with Academic Difficulties

What You Can Do As an Advisor

You may question how much responsibility to take in student problem solving. Involve yourself to the degree you are comfortable – based on how well you have become acquainted, your mutual expectations, and the parameters of your role as academic advisor.

Monitor academic progress at the beginning of the term

You can review academic progress at the beginning of the term to identify students who are struggling. Viewing a student academic transcript is often a good way to see trends within a student's academic progress. Know the GPA requirements for good academic standing in your program. In addition to students who fall significantly short of good standing and are likely to be on probation, make note of students whose grades are uncharacteristically below their usual performance or have failed a single course. Performance at this level, which clearly indicates problems, may not always alert the university, and will possibly only be noticed by you. For some students, meeting with you may be the opportunity to get the timely support they need to face the academic challenges contributing to their poor performance.

Steps for advising students who are struggling or on academic probation

1. **Within the first week of classes review current course schedule and make changes if needed.** Make sure you know what classes your advisee has registered for in the new term. Be sure the student is registered for an appropriate number of credit hours. Check that courses are taken in their appropriate sequence. Also, check that prerequisites and general education requirements (Integrative Studies, mathematics, modern language) are appropriately being completed. Schedule course combinations that might ease some pressure. When possible, schedule classes with the goal in mind of getting the highest grades possible to raise the GPA.

2. **Review and explain academic probation.** Explain expectations and consequences using the Catalog as a reference and show the student where to find this information. Students placed on academic probation have been alerted that they have failed to meet minimum academic standards and that they must begin to improve the quality of their work now in order to avoid being suspended by the university.

3. **Discuss strategies for improvement.** No matter how the discussion evolves, students should be encouraged to talk about their sense of what the difficulties are and what steps they are taking to improve their performance. Support students in evaluating their situation honestly and making their own decisions. Following are common academic factors to explore with the student that may have contributed to failure:
   - Difficult classes/not prepared for course level
   - Registered for too many classes
   - Lack of utilizing professors' office hours
   - Unable to understand course content/relevance
• Overall schedule too rigorous (school, athletics, work, etc)
• Ineffective study skills
• Did not attend/skipped class
• Over-involved with extra-curricular activities
• Working too much
• Undeveloped time management skills
• Unprepared for exams
• Difficulty with early classes
• Not using approved academic accommodation with Disability Services
• Possible learning disability

4. **Revisit choice of major.** If the courses that caused a student a problem were courses in their major area, it might be the time to revisit their academic goals. Doing poorly in an entry-level major course may indicate that they need to explore other options. Encourage students to speak to faculty in other majors. Students should also be encouraged to visit the Center for Career & Professional Development to discuss other possible major directions.

5. **Initiate referrals where additional support is indicated and follow up.** Check in with the student a couple of weeks into the term to see how they are doing, keeping in mind the last day to withdraw from a class with a W.

### A Detailed Guide to Understanding Typical Issues Contributing to Academic Difficulty

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<th>Typical Issue</th>
<th>How to Tell if this is the Issue</th>
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| Lack of Study Skills/Time Management | Students who struggle in this area tend to work hard – they do homework, attend class – but yet, still don't have good grades. Often these students will talk about not knowing how to study or not knowing what to do when they are not in class to prepare for an exam **Probing Questions:**
- Tell me about high school and how you managed your academics?
- Tell me how you prepared for a specific class or specific assignments last term?
- How do you manage your time? Do you use a planner (paper or phone)? | The Academic Support Center offers a course, ASC 1100, specifically designed to learn study skills and successful student habits/behaviors. This course is open to any student. Additionally, the staff in the Academic Support Center can provide individual guidance to students on a case by case basis. |
| Lack of direction or disconnection with intended major | Some students have lost interest in their initial major, or are not a good fit given their own skills and interests. This can happen as a student learns the realities of what a major really involves (Nursing is more than helping people – there is science involved!) or as they | The Center for Career and Professional Development can help students explore their own interests, values and skills to seek career and major options that maximize those interests and skills. They offer self- |
move into their own autonomous sense of self and realize their interests may have been directed by family and friends more than themselves. Students who feel this disconnect will often excel in some classes and struggle in others (in other words – there is a lack of consistency in their academic performance)

**Probing Questions:**
- Tell me what drew you to INSERT MAJOR in the first place?
- What have been your favorite classes thus far (or in high school)?
- When you think about the classes remaining in your major – do they excite you, interest you, or not?

| Lack of Motivation/Emotional Health Issues | Many capable and smart students hit emotional roadblocks while in college that have a negative impact on their academic performance. Even the most capable students can be challenged by experiencing major life changes (death in family, significant illness, relationship changes such as break-ups). These students can often identify the issue, but not seek assistance to overcome the issue. Students who report changes in behavior (rare attendance issues to frequent attendance issues, changes in sleep and appetite habits, lack of interest in co-curricular activities, etc.) can be struggling with something emotional or related to mental health. Students who have these challenges often have a sudden change in academic performance (do well several semesters and then suddenly have a poor semester).
- **Probing Questions:**
  - Tell me about this past semester and what was different for you than in the past?
  - What has been happening in your life outside of school – anything drawing your attention away from Full-time students are eligible for three free counseling sessions a year. Students sign up through the Student Affairs office. If a student is unsure about seeing a counselor, they can start by meeting with someone in Student Affairs to talk through their concerns and the overall process. |
| Learning Disability | Many students have a documented learning disability or may be having struggles in class that seem beyond their control. First, if a student discloses that they have a learning disability, ask about accommodations or support that they are receiving from the Disability Services Office (within the Academic Support Center). Many students do not actively seek support when they come to college thinking that they will be able to succeed without the help. If the students does not disclose a disability, but seems to have unique behaviors, referring them for a meeting is always helpful. Students who have learning disabilities often talk about things like having a hard time following along in class, studying for hours at a time, but not doing well on tests, trouble taking notes, difficulty with memory, misspelled words, slow reading, difficulty with a particular subject (but good grades overall). **Probing Questions:** - Tell me about how you prepared for your last exam? - Show me your notes for a particular class? How do you approach note-taking? - Have you had these types of struggled before or in all of your classes? | Students can receive assistance from the Disability Services Coordinator in the Academic Support Center. We do not provide testing for learning disabilities, but can help a student determine if they should seek testing and provide referrals. Students who already have a diagnosis should register for accommodations even if they don’t think they will use them immediately. |

### Understanding Academic Standing

Academic Standing can be complicated to understand for even those with significant experience in higher education. The detailed language and policy is located in the Academic Catalog online. An easy way to think about the policy is that any student who falls below the established standards is put on probation. If a student improves their GPA in the next term and moves into good standing, their probation is over. If a student does not improve their GPA enough to reach good standing, they stay on probation for a second term. If after a second consecutive term on probation, the student still does not improve their GPA, they are suspended.
**Good Standing Guidelines:**

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<th>Total Earned Hours</th>
<th>Minimum GPA to be in Good Standing</th>
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<tr>
<td>0-32</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33+</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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**GPA Calculators**

Academic standing is based on cumulative GPA and therefore it is often difficult to predict the impact of a single term on a cumulative GPA. There are many GPA calculators available online that can help predict GPA changes, including credit hours and grades needed to reach certain benchmarks (or the potential impact of future terms).

*A sample GPA Calculator can be found at:*

http://www.back2college.com/raisegpa.htm

**Ways to Increase GPA**

Grade Replacement – this policy provides a way for students to quickly remove poor grades from their GPA calculation. Re-taking the same class at Otterbein, and receiving a higher grade on the repeated attempt, will remove the original grade from the GPA calculation and use the new grade instead. If a student re-takes an equivalent course at another institution and transfers it to Otterbein, the previous poor grade is removed, but the new transfer grade is not calculated into the GPA. For the official grade replacement policy, review the Catalog online.

- **Warning** – Students who have failed or withdrawn from numerous classes, should be cautious about grade replacement. See section below about the intersection of academic standing with financial aid. Repeating courses works against a student’s attempted versus completed course percentage.

**Financial Aid and Academic Difficulties**

Financial Aid and academic standing are closely tied, but there are some distinctions that are important to understand.

The most important policy related to financial aid and students who are struggling academically is Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). This is the process by which the Federal Government ensures that students are making progress towards a degree while receiving federal financial aid. It both protects the student from taking out excessive aid, such as loans, when they are not making progress and also protects the aid system from abuse of students who are overusing aid.

*SAP is measured at the conclusion of each term. There are three key things that SAP measures:*

- Percentage of credit hours completed compared to those attempted
- Total hours earned in excess of those needed for a degree
Total time to a degree

The percentage completion is where many students who are struggling academically run into SAP problems as well. Any time a student drops a course, with a W (withdrawal), or fails a course it counts against their hours attempted. Students who have excessive course withdrawals or failures should proceed with caution if they consider taking a W or Failing a course. Additionally, repeating course works against this percentage as well. Students accumulate the attempted hours each time they take it, but earn the hours only on the one time they are successful.

What to do if your student has SAP issues:

- Work with the student to build a schedule that will prevent withdrawals or failures. For example, if a student seems to always start the term with 16 hours, but typically fails or withdraws from one class over the course of the term, suggest that they consider only 12.
- Work with the student to understand the issues that are causing problem (See chart above) to help them make a plan for change. If the same behavior continues, the problem will likely continue.

Most importantly, know that the Financial Aid office is a great resource for students who have questions about how changes in their academic path might impact their aid. Students should always consider consulting with financial aid before dropping a course during the term.

Retention Referrals

Whenever there is the chance for a student to earn a less than satisfactory grade in a course, the instructor is encouraged to submit a retention referral. The retention referral is processed by the Center for Student Success and is sent to the following people:

- Academic Advisor
- Center for Student Success
- Residence Hall Director (if they reside in campus housing)
- Director of Residence Life (if they reside in campus housing)
- Assistant Director of the Office of Diversity (if they are a commuter)
- Director of the Office of Diversity (if they are a commuter)
- Assistant Director for Greek Life (if they are a member of social Greek Life)

The Academic Advisor should reach out via email or phone to these students so that they may discuss their low academic performance. Students are often grateful for the extra support and any potential referrals to support services.
Resources that advisors may find useful:


Ldonline.org (Learning Disability resource site)