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"I Feel Like I Was Set up to Fail": Exploring the Experiences of Students on Academic Probation

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Abstract

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experience of students on academic probation as they related to navigating the complexity of causal factors and their impact on self-regulated learning behaviors and motivation. Participants were students who had persisted at least one semester after being placed on academic probation at a small, private, liberal arts college in Western Canada. Data was collected through individual interviews with students using a protocol that was designed for the study. Interviews were transcribed, reduced to anecdotes, and then analyzed using a hermeneutic approach centered around the processes of epoché and reduction. Through these processes, emerging themes revealed the complexity of experiences faced by students on academic probation.

***Keywords*:** academic probation, self-regulated learning, motivation, self-efficacy

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Studies have estimated that anywhere from 25-40% of college students will be placed on academic probation at least once during their college careers (Casey et al., 2018; Cohen & Brawer, 2002, as cited in Seirup & Rose, 2011). Despite the number of students impacted by academic probation and dismissal, research on this population of students, the impact of academic probation and dismissal policies, and effective interventions is limited (Arcand & Leblanc, 2012). This lack of data is problematic as academic failure can have a significant personal and financial toll on students (e.g., Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; Barouch-Gilbert, 2016b; Ost et al., 2018) and institutions. Students who are placed on academic probation are less likely to be retained and less likely to graduate (Cornelisz et al., 2020; Lindo et al., 2010).

In an era of declining population (Bauman, 2024), student retention efforts are paramount. Many institutions have implemented interventions from psychologically attuned probation letters (Brady, 2017; Brady et al., 2019; Waltenbury et al., 2019) to student success courses (e.g., Bowering et al., 2017; Burke León et al., 2019; Hensley et al., 2018) in an effort to retain students in academic jeopardy. Although these interventions show promise, they do not always address the factors that led to academic probation. Though demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status can increase the likelihood of falling into academic probation (Horton, 2015), external factors such as financial hardship, employment, relational issues, and mental and physical health may play a more significant role in student success (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; James & Graham, 2010; Jevons & Lindsay, 2018).

To effectively support and retain students in academic jeopardy, we must understand the complex factors that contribute to both academic struggle and academic success. In a meta-analysis of the relationship between psychological and non-intellectual differences and college success, Richardson et al. (2012) identified motivation and self-regulation as two factors that were predictive of college GPA, accounting for 26% of the variance in GPA when controlling for high school achievement. Much research supports the importance of self-regulated learning (SRL), motivation, and self-efficacy in college success (e.g., Kryshko et al., 2020; Ning & Downing, 2015; Pintrich & Zusho, 2007; Zimmerman, 2002). However, it should come as no surprise that environmental factors can either enhance or deplete self-regulation, motivation, and self-efficacy (Ben-Eliyahu & Bernacki, 2015; Miller & Mills, 2019; Ning & Downing, 2015; Pintrich & Zusho, 2007). Using an SRL framework, this qualitative study examines the interrelationships between environmental and noncognitive factors for students on academic probation. Two research questions guided this exploration:

1. How do students describe the factors that contributed to their academic probation status and the impact they had on their learning?
2. How do students describe the ways in which they regulate their learning and motivation while on academic probation?

This study addresses several gaps in the literature on academic probation and self-regulated learning. As much of the existing literature on academic probation focuses on student characteristics, rather than the complexities of academic probation (Arcand & Leblanc, 2012), this study adds depth to the literature by considering the diversity of student experience and risk factors. Further, very little is known about the self-regulated learning skills of students on academic probation (e.g., Lee & Blankenship, 2021). This study provides a greater understanding of how external factors impact student learning and success.

Theoretical Framework

Self-regulated learning (SRL) has long been linked to college academic achievement (e.g., Liu et al., 2014; Ning & Downing, 2015; Zimmerman, 2002). SRL has been broadly defined as a proactive and self-directed process towards a goal, encompassing cognitive, affective, and motivational aspects of learning (Pintrich, 2004). SRL theories are rooted in social cognitive theory (Wolters, 2003). As agents in their development, humans act based on cognitive, affective, individual, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1989). SRL constructs assume that learners "construct their own meanings, goals, and strategies from the information available in the 'external' environment as well as information in their own minds" (Pintrich & Zusho, 2007, p. 739).

Although there are many SRL models, this study utilized Ben-Eliyahu and Bernaki's (2015) ecological model of SRL. This model emphasizes the multiple contextual layers that have an impact on student learning. Student learning is thus not solely influenced by the classroom environment, but by the larger context of family, peers, school climate, neighborhood culture, media, political policies, national customs, and economic patterns. These systems of influence can have a profound impact upon a student's ability to self-regulate learning, either enhancing or depleting it. As SRL is a finite resource, this model recognizes the complex interplay between the external environment and human agency.

Literature Review

The Purpose and Practice of Academic Probation

Though the origins are unclear, academic probation and dismissal policies have been entrenched in North American higher education for at least a century. Articles published in the early 1920s mention the practice of academic probation at Brown University (Colvin, 1921) and Dartmouth University (Stone, 1922). Academic probation status is primarily determined by course grades, most often in the form of GPA (Butler et al., 2016). Arcand and Leblanc (2012) suggested that academic probation policies have three common elements: a determined threshold (most commonly GPA) that indicates poor academic standing, the option to continue studying, and a requirement to return to good academic standing or face dismissal. On the surface, academic probation policies appear to serve as a warning to students (Moss & Yeaton, 2015). However, academic probation policies can also be seen as a means to "weed out students who have little chance of success and motivate those most likely to succeed" (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2014, p. 6).

Barouch-Gilbert (2019) argued that the "weeding out" purpose is based in deficit perspectives. Students that struggle are frequently seen as deficient because of internal or external factors that are inherent in who they are (Smit, 2012). Indeed, in one study researchers noted that a tenured faculty member referred to students on probation as the "dregs of the university" (Burke León et al., 2019, p. 53). Focusing on contributing demographic factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status has the potential to increase stereotypes, marginalize certain populations of students, and lower teacher expectations (Smit, 2012). This can have a

compounding impact on academic achievement. For example, stereotype threat has been linked to reduced academic outcomes (e.g., Owens & Massey, 2011).

The flip side of academic probation policies is student retention (Barouch-Gilbert, 2019). The threshold for determining academic probation status is closely tied to the minimum GPA required for graduation and financial aid (Butler et al., 2016; Moody, 2019; Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2014). The student retention lens provides a balance to attributing academic outcomes solely to student agency and recognizes the role of the institution in providing access to students from a diversity of backgrounds (Burke León et al., 2019; Smit, 2012). Even so, retention can get lost as policies are often tied to a deficit perspective (Barouch-Gilbert, 2019).

Beliefs about human agency may contribute to the tension between deficit and retention perspectives of academic probation. For example, Yeaton and Moss (2020) described academic probation as a mechanism to change student behavior. This implies that responsibility for academic standing rests on the agency of the student. This makes some sense as studies have linked effort to academic outcomes (e.g., Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2012). In contrast, Nelson (2018) argued that luck plays a substantial role in student success. As such, agentic messaging can be disempowering to students who face circumstances that are out of their control. The environment is thus a significant contributor to academic probation. It is therefore important for academic probation policies and processes to account for the complex interplay between humans and their environment (Bandura, 1989).

Barriers to Academic Success

Academic probation, or more broadly academic failure, does not have a single cause. Research studies (e.g., Ajjawi et al., 2020; Humphrey, 2006; Jevons & Lindsay, 2018) have suggested that the factors that lead to academic failure are often complex, with students frequently citing multiple factors. In their mixed methods studies with students at an Australian university who had persisted after failing one or more courses, Ajjawi et al. (2019, 2020) adapted Bowles and Brindle's (2017) student retention framework to categorize factors that contributed to students falling into academic jeopardy and those that encouraged them to persist (See Table 1). Ajjawi et al. (2020) found that students most often attributed their academic failure to situational factors—health (mental and physical), employment, and financial issues. Though mentioned less frequently, students also identified institutional and dispositional barriers to academic success. Institutional factors most often related to curriculum and instruction. Participants reported that dissonance between the curriculum and their future careers, poorly designed assessments, and "dis-engaged teaching approaches" (p. 191) adversely impacted their academic success. In contrast, dispositional factors are factors rooted in the student, such as motivation, intention, and self-efficacy. The two most common dispositional factors cited by participants were poor study habits and low motivation.

Table 1

Examples of Facilitating or Hindering Factors

Situational Factors	Institutional Factors	Dispositional Factors
Finances	Institutional characteristics	Student demographics
Relationships	Staff and Faculty	Noncognitive factors
Health	Campus resources	Social belonging

Note. Examples drawn from Ajjawi et al. (2019, 2020) and Bowles and Brindle (2017).

Situational Factors

Situational factors have been frequently identified as significant causal factors of academic failure across studies (Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; James & Graham, 2010; Jevons & Lindsay, 2018). In a review of the literature on factors contributing to academic probation, James and Graham (2010) listed family issues/responsibilities, employment, and financial struggle as the most frequently cited causal factors. They asserted that reasons for academic probation are consistent and "somewhat universal in nature" (p. 72). In their study, family issues were one of the two most frequently cited personal issues leading to academic probation. This was echoed by Jevons and Lindsay (2018). Family issues mentioned by participants ranged from poor health of family members to family deaths to intergenerational conflict to conflict between parents to a general lack of support.

Financial struggle and employment issues are another common factor. Jevons and Lindsay (2018) noted a strong relationship between hours worked and the ability to complete academic tasks. Financial struggle can also be linked to socio-economic status (SES). Capstick et al. (2019) observed that low SES students (as measured by Pell Grant status) on academic warning at a Southern research university had on average lower GPAs than students from higher income brackets. Kopp and Shaw (2016) also found that students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to leave college when in academic jeopardy than students from higher income levels.

Mental and physical health are also common contributing factors (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Brost & Payne, 2011; Jevons & Lindsay, 2020; White et al., 2020). Mental health is an especially complex factor, as other factors, such as financial or academic stress, can cause or exacerbate mental health issues. White et al. (2020) noted this interplay between other factors and mental health in their study with first-generation students on academic probation. One participant reported becoming depressed because of pressure to succeed. Geetshuis (2019) found that student anxiety predicted goal avoidance and negatively predicted self-directed learning behavior. Additionally, students' level of depression was linked to lower academic outcomes and predictive of thoughts of leaving, negative affect, and a reduced sense of belonging.

Institutional Factors

Across studies, institutional factors were the least commonly mentioned factors contributing to academic probation (Ajjawi et al., 2020; James & Graham, 2010). When they

were mentioned, they often took the form of curricular or instructional issues (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Cherif et al., 2013, 2014, 2015). Although some students mentioned the impersonal nature of the institution (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Arcand & Leblanc, 2011; Giampa & Symbaluk, 2018), students more frequently cited a lack of understanding of institutional policies or an unfamiliarity with campus resources (Brost & Payne, 2011; Giampa & Symbaluk, 2018; James & Graham, 2010; White et al., 2020). This is significant as the very resources that are meant to facilitate academic success are frequently unknown (e.g., White et al., 2020) or underutilized by students in academic jeopardy (e.g., Flynn, 2015; Giampa & Symbaluk, 2018). Brost and Payne (2011) observed that "the burden of finding support rests on students who have not demonstrated a competence of how the university works" (p. 77).

Students' perceptions of faculty and the learning environment can influence their level of engagement and their academic outcomes (Miller & Mills, 2019; Ning & Downing, 2015). For example, Miller and Mills (2019) established that student perceptions of faculty care can influence their academic engagement. Ning and Downing's (2015) research also suggested this link. A multinomial logistic regression analysis of survey responses from 828 seniors at a university in Hong Kong "revealed that teaching quality, clear goals and standards, appropriate assessment and appropriate workload" (p. 1341) are significant predictors of student self-regulated learning (SRL). Each positive increase in these factors increased the likelihood of students having higher levels of SRL skills. Higher SRL skills were in turn correlated with higher GPA.

Dispositional Factors

Dispositional factors include such things as demographic categories, student behaviors and beliefs, personal goals, institutional connection, and personality (Bowles & Brindle, 2017). Though students tend to attribute their academic challenges to situational factors (e.g., Bowering et al., 2017), dispositional factors have been researched more frequently (e.g., Brost & Payne, 2011; Giampa & Symbaluk, 2018; Hamman, 2018; James & Graham, 2010; Lindo et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2012). For example, gender, SES, parental education level, age, race, and ethnicity have frequently been tied to various academic outcomes (e.g., Horton, 2015). Across studies, males and minoritized students are overrepresented among students on academic probation (Burke León et al., 2019; Capstick et al., 2019; Hamman, 2018; Hanger et al., 2011; James & Graham, 2010). However, the research is unclear as Fletcher and Tokmouline (2017) did not find any clear effect patterns for gender or race/ethnicity when looking at the impact of academic probation on retention and graduation rates at four Texas universities. Though patterns did exist at single institutions, they were not consistent across all institutions.

In addition to demographic variables, student behaviors also impact academic success. Students have commonly cited issues such as poor program choice, a lack of preparedness, poor study habits, and poor time management (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Casey et al., 2018; Cornelisz et al., 2020; Giampa & Symbaluk, 2018; James & Graham, 2010; Richardson et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis of 217 papers on the relationships between psycho-social variables and academic achievement, Richardson et al. (2012) found that of the 42 noncognitive variables assessed, self-efficacy, grade goals, and effort regulation had the strongest impact on GPA. Richardson et al. suggested that "a combination of motivation…and self-regulatory capacity…predicts tertiary GPA" (p. 374).

Two studies with college students have investigated SRL profiles and academic achievement. Liu et al. (2014) identified four distinct SRL profiles among students at a community college. Two of the profiles were considered maladaptive. Students in these groups (37.5%) reported low motivation, low self-efficacy, and low academic strategy use. These profiles also had the lowest grades and reported experiencing less enjoyment in their studies. In a similar study, Ning and Downing (2015) also identified four distinct profiles. The largest cluster (31.9%) used the fewest SRL strategies and had the lowest levels of motivation. This group also had the lowest GPA among profiles.

Only two studies could be located that specifically investigated the SRL skills of students on academic probation. Hensley et al. (2018) looked at self-reported time management differences between students on academic probation and students in good standing in a college success course. Students on probation reported higher rates of procrastination and lower rates of goal setting and prioritizing than those in good standing. They also reported spending less time studying. Lee and Blankenship (2021) investigated how first-year students on academic probation used SRL and motivational strategies to achieve their future-orientated academic goals. Survey results indicated that students on academic probation had low levels of intrinsic motivation and reported lower use of SRL strategies. Participants were also more likely to select academic strategies requiring less effort, such as paying attention, when working toward their academic goals. These findings seem to indicate that students on academic probation may in general possess lower SRL skills.

Contributors to Academic Recovery

In their study on student adaptations in response to failing courses, Ajjawi et al. (2019) observed that most participants reported making situational, institutional, and dispositional adaptations. Over half of the participants mentioned receiving support from family and friends as they persisted in their studies. Most participants additionally reported making dispositional changes, such as improving their time management and adopting more self-regulatory behaviors. Notably, very few students admitted to using institutional supports. This is interesting as much of the literature on academic recovery is focused on institutional interventions (e.g., Bowering et al., 2017; Capstick et al., 2019; Hanger et al., 2011).

The most significant situational factor facilitating academic recovery that was cited by students across studies was family and peer relationships (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; Barouch-Gilbert, 2016a, 2017; Giampa & Symbaluk, 2018). Barouch-Gilbert (2016a, 2017) identified two threads in the process of academic recovery when interviewing students in the United States and the Dominican Republic who were on academic probation. Both cohorts of students expressed that encouragement from family, peers, and the institution was instrumental in their persistence efforts. Role models also helped them persevere. Barouch-Gilbert referred to this as vicarious self-efficacy—others believe in me, so I believe in myself.

Although students did not report voluntarily increasing their use of institutional resources, many institutions have implemented programming to facilitate academic recovery. These programs fall into one of two categories—one-on-one interventions, such as advising and academic coaching, and group interventions, such as student success courses (Kamphoff et al., 2006). Several studies have indicated that students who do participate in these supports have higher GPA gains and are more likely to be retained than students who do not participate (e.g.,

Bowering et al., 2017; Bowman et al., 2020; Burke León et al., 2019; Capstick et al., 2019), though not all institutions have chosen to make participation mandatory (e.g., Johnson et al., 2016; McGrath & Burd, 2012).

Interventions often aim to help students make dispositional changes—changes to study habits, self-beliefs, and behaviors (e.g., Renzulli, 2015). However, it is not always clear whether they are achieving their goal. For example, Renzulli interviewed nine students who had completed a student success course. Although most students indicated making changes to their study habits through employing learning strategies, two of the students did not believe the effort was worth it. Similarly, 30% of participants in Ajjawi et al.'s study (2019) reported making no behavior adaptations after experiencing academic failure.

Research Design

For this study, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 2014) to explore how persisting students at a four-year, liberal arts college in Western Canada experienced academic probation. I specifically was seeking to explore the interrelationships between SRL and causal factors of academic probation. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the meaning of lived experience through looking for the qualities, or essence, of the phenomenon as it is experienced in the context of everyday life (Moustakas, 1994). This is accomplished through the processes of epoché*,* or bracketing*,* and reduction (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). This methodology was chosen because I was employed at the study site during the study. As such, I was tangibly immersed in the context. Trustworthiness and credibility were addressed through data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Onweugbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Participants

Participants in the current study all attended at least one semester at the study site after being placed on academic probation or subject to dismissal. The study site was a small (<500 students), private four-year college in western Canada. After the study received IRB approval, participants meeting the criterion were recruited through email. As a show of appreciation, each participant received a $20 gift card. Eight students volunteered to participate in the study. Students were assigned random pseudonyms to protect their identity (See Table 2). Of the eight participants, seven self-identified as having a disability, and two self-identified as belonging to minoritized ethnic groups.

Table 2

Participants

Participant	Gender	Self-Identified as Disabled	Minoritized Ethnic Group	Enrollment status	First on contract
Desiree	Female	Yes	Yes	Graduated	Year 1 Sem 2
Gabriela	Female	Yes	No	RTD	Year 2 Sem 1
Jason	Male	Yes	No	Enrolled – GS	Year 2 Sem 1
Kara	Female	Yes	No	Withdrawn	Year 1 Sem 2
Marie	Female	Yes	Yes	Enrolled – GS	Year 2 Sem 1
Shayla	Female	Yes	No	Enrolled – AP	Year 3 Sem 2
Sophia	Female	No	No	Enrolled – AA	Year 2 Sem 1
Trinity	Female	Yes	No	RTD	Year 2 Sem 1

Note. AA = Academic Alert; AP = Academic Probation; GS = Good Standing; RTD = Required to Discontinue. (Students are placed on academic alert when their cumulative GPA remains above the AP threshold, but their semester GPA falls below.)

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a protocol developed for this study (see Appendix). The seven questions in the protocol were devised to reflect Seidman's (2019) three themes for phenomenological interviewing: life history, lived experience, and reflection on lived experience. Question 1 focused on life history through investigating the experiences of a participant just prior to being placed on academic probation. Questions 2-6 addressed the lived experience of academic probation with a focus on academic experiences. The final question asked the participants to reflect on the meaning of their lived experience. Prior to using the interview protocol with participants, it was pilot tested with a former student so that questions could be refined and clarified.

Interviews were conducted either on campus or virtually and ranged in duration from 22 to 57 minutes. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed for analysis. After transcription, participants were given the opportunity to make any changes to the transcripts. No changes were requested. After member checking, I engaged in the process of reduction, guided by van Manen (2014), Cohen et al. (2000), and Seidman (2019). After immersing myself in the data, I created anecdotes, or profiles. I then reorganized the interview data, grouping participant statements relating to a particular topic. This led to identifying "essential characteristics…from each interview" (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 76). In the final step of analysis, I examined each sentence for what it revealed about the phenomenon.

Once themes were identified, I engaged in a second round of member-checking based on an adaptation of Birt et al.'s (2016) Synthesized Member Checking (SMC) method. I compiled the themes, theme descriptions, and exemplary anecdotes in an online survey. Each of the themes was defined and then followed by two to three illustrative quotes. Participants were then asked to rate how much each theme was reflective of their academic probation experience on a 5-point

Likert scale. A rating of 5 indicated that the theme was very reflective of the participant's experience, whereas a rating of 1 indicated that a theme was not very reflective of their experience. At the end of each section, participants had the option of adding open-ended comments. Six of the eight participants completed the survey. Although no themes were altered based on the results of the survey, the results added nuance to my understanding of each of the themes.

Throughout the processes of interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, and writing, I engaged in analytic memo writing. The memos functioned both as a space to practice epoché and as a space to record data decisions, descriptions of themes, and reflection (Saldaña, 2016). As writing is an essential practice of phenomenology (van Manen, 2014), the memos were a record of my thinking throughout the study.

Findings

The overall phenomenological meaning of the texts in this study (van Manan, 2014) can be captured by the word dissonance. Though this word was not used by participants, participants consistently described feelings and experiences that were at odds with the academic environment. Each theme that emerged illustrates the overarching essence of dissonance. The first four themes that emerged from the data addressed research question 1 (How do students describe the factors that contributed to their academic probation status and the impact they had on their learning?), while the remaining theme illustrated research question 2 (How do students describe the ways in which they regulated their learning and motivation while on academic probation?).

Dissonance Between High School and College Experiences

Participants often spoke about the differences between high school and college or the ways in which their high school experience impacted their college behaviors. This experience of dissonance was most pronounced during the first year. For example, Trinity stated, "I had a deeply rooted belief that I wasn't smart, that I couldn't do well, and that college wasn't for me." This belief stemmed from years of school struggle that continued to impact her self-efficacy beliefs into the second year of college. This experience of high school struggle was shared by Desiree, Gabriela, and Jason. Gabriela spoke of ongoing struggles with reading comprehension, whereas Desiree simply stated, "I wasn't the greatest high school student."

Other areas of dissonance between high school and college experiences encompassed academic expectations and social dynamics. Sophia, a first-generation college student, talked about being unprepared to meet academic expectations. She said:

> I would study, but I wouldn't do it the proper way. I didn't know how I learned best at that point, so I was always doing things that weren't super beneficial. If I had to read something, I would just read it a lot of times, but I still wouldn't comprehend it properly.

Shayla spoke of the transition to college academics as "jarring," largely because of the difference in workload.

The different social dynamics between high school and college also interfered with academic engagement. Most participants lived in residence during their first year. Jason spoke of

tension with his roommate that resulted in him spending very little time in his room. Kara, who was also managing a job in addition to school, found the social dynamics draining. On the other hand, Marie was invigorated by the expanded social environment that she found in college. Marie said that she "chose to be social over homework."

Dissonance Between Disability and Accessibility

Students with disabilities expressed two primary areas of dissonance. First, many students had limited understanding of their disabilities or how those disabilities impacted classroom learning. Second, students were adversely impacted by what was sometimes a lack of accessibility and even inclusivity in the learning environment. Many of the students who self-identified had disabilities that impacted their executive functioning skills. At times, this increased the difficulty of common academic tasks such as taking notes, maintaining attention, and prioritizing tasks.

Desiree, Trinity, and Jason all shared that they were not formally diagnosed as having a disability until after high school. Each entered college with few strategies and a limited understanding of the impact of their disability on aspects of their lives. Trinity was not diagnosed until after she had been required to discontinue. After getting diagnosed, Trinity began to see how her disabilities were impacting her ability to function in the classroom. She described it as "missing something," saying "I had all these strengths, but it felt like having really strong table legs but no tabletop to hold them together."

Most participants with disabilities also expressed a sense of dissonance with the learning environment because of their disabilities. For example, Kara shared that she struggled to focus on school because she was constantly "unpacking" emotions in her therapy sessions. Because of her mental health and treatment, she felt excluded and struggled to engage in the classroom environment. Shayla felt that professors did not understand her struggles with ADHD even when she attempted to explain, saying:

> I just sat there, and I was like, "I wish I could tell you why I can't do it in half an hour to an hour…" My phone isn't even in my hands, I'm just doing homework—and I can't do it.

Dissonance Between Academic Life and the Rest of Life

As in previous studies, situational factors had a profound impact on academic success. Participants commonly experienced challenges such as family issues, peer issues, health issues, and financial issues. Family issues included any family dynamic (negative or positive) that adversely impacted academic success. For example, Marie described her family as being close-knit. As the oldest child, Marie acknowledged the expectations her home culture placed on that role. She spoke of "being there" for her parents, supporting her siblings, and participating in the larger community. Sophia, the only parent in the study, also acknowledged the complexity of caring for her young child while doing full-time school. Other students described their families in more negative terms. Desiree said avoiding living at home was one of the main motivators for continuing in college, even though she was struggling academically. Kara and Sophia spoke of their families as being less than supportive of their academic endeavors.

In addition to family issues impacting academic success, peer group issues also played a role. These involved roommates, friend groups, and significant others. For example, Jason experienced turmoil in his relationship with his roommate. Gabriela shared that her friend group had "a lot of stress and drama," adversely impacting her coping abilities. Shayla was in an abusive relationship. As an insider, I had small windows on the experiences of most of my participants. The peer issues shared by each were over and above what would be considered "normal."

Financial hardship, often resulting in the need to increase work hours, was a factor for three participants. Kara, Shayla, and Marie were stressed by money issues and then further stressed by the number of hours employment took away from college requirements. Failing classes also compounded the stress. Marie said she felt guilty about the support that her parents were giving, especially as money was often short.

Given the timing of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic also loomed large. For some participants, the pandemic hindered their academic recovery, and for others it contributed to falling into academic probation. Jason and Trinity were both derailed in their recovery efforts by a move to online learning in Spring 2020. Marie and Shayla tested positive for COVID-19 after the return to in-person learning. Marie's symptoms lingered, severely depleting her energy: "I could only do one to two hours max a day and then my brain couldn't do anymore." Not only was this discouraging, but it made it difficult to catch up.

Dissonance Between Self and the Academic Environment

Several of the participants indicated a sense of mismatch between the academic environment and themselves. These included challenges related to instruction styles, academic policies, or individual professors. Kara described college as being "set up…for people almost 70 years ago." She did not feel that the college structure was "beneficial for the way [she] learn[ed]." Three of the participants labeled themselves as kinesthetic learners, preferring "hands on" activities. They felt the emphasis on lectures, and especially papers, was "cerebral" space. Trinity and Kara also felt that assessment was not always connected to learning.

Other participants shared struggles engaging with faculty. Because of their academic struggles, they often felt embarrassed to ask questions or ashamed of missing assignments. More than one student did not want to be a "burden" to faculty. Additionally, how students perceived their professors influenced asking for help. For example, Marie was staying in the hospital with her sister and supporting her parents. She talked to two professors about her situation and received tremendous support. She described these professors as "amazing" and "super understanding." However, she did not feel "as comfortable sharing" with her other professors because she "didn't think they'd understand."

Dissonance Related to Self-Regulation of Learning and Motivation

As many of the contributing factors of academic probation played an ongoing role in their college experience, the main difference between the pre-academic probation period and academic probation was that participants had received an official notice of academic status from the registrar. This notice had variable impacts on SRL and motivation. For example, Jason stated that "being on probation gave me a firm consequence and motivated me to get off of it." In

contrast, Kara said, "being on probation was just like 'whatever,' because I was never too far into it." However, even when being placed on academic probation induced change, that change was often minimal or short lasting. Jason, Trinity, Shayla, Desiree, and Gabriela all mentioned making only small adjustments to their study habits. They primarily discussed improved time management and changes to their study environments.

Six of the eight participants mentioned making some attempt to better organize their schedule and prioritize their academic work. Sophia stated that she tried to keep to a "strict schedule" and "put friends after homework." Marie kept a detailed planner full of checklists and sticky notes. Each day, she would list all her assignments on a sticky note and number them in order of priority. Marie also adopted a "study ritual" to help her mentally focus on studying. Jason blocked out times during the day for studying. Trinity located a specific table in the campus café that was public but provided some isolation. Even with adaptations to study routines, most participants expressed ongoing struggles with procrastination. It was common for participants to start strong and then fizzle out as the semester progressed. Gabriela summed it up, saying "I would always have good intentions."

More than any other aspect of SRL, participants talked about their motivational states. Motivation was largely tied to self-efficacy beliefs. For example, participants frequently expressed that they felt like they were "less capable" than other students. This was often accompanied by embarrassment. Trinity spoke of feeling like her inability to submit assignments was "more of an ethics and character thing" than an academic issue, leading her to feel "like a failure." Internal struggles with self-worth were also projected to others. Shayla worried that professors were judging her for her struggles even though she knew logically that this was not the case. Receiving their academic status notification also impacted participants' self-efficacy beliefs. For Jason, it confirmed his belief that he "wasn't a good student." He felt that failure was inevitable, that he had been "set up to fail" because of the circumstances surrounding his first year, most of which were out of his control.

It was also difficult for participants not to compare themselves to others. Marie described seeing friends who would be able to do their homework quickly or absorb content easily. Because it took her longer to complete her work, she felt discouraged, thinking "Why are they able to do it, but I can't fully do it like that?" This led to feelings of "not being good enough" which spiraled into Marie decreasing the effort she put into her assignments. Jason and Gabriela each expressed a similar sentiment when they described their embarrassment when friends talked about completing assignments quickly or receiving a good grade on an assignment they had failed.

During the period of academic probation, some participants reported a positive shift in their self-efficacy beliefs. In many cases, these shifts came because of what Boekaerts (2011) referred to as "re-appraising the situation" (p. 420). For example, Gabriela came to the realization through a psychology class that there were "different areas of smart" besides "school smart." Improved grades had a positive impact on self-efficacy beliefs for Marie, Sophia, and Desiree. Marie talked about receiving a higher grade than she had expected on an assignment and feeling like, "I did this once, I can do it again. What was it that I did because I need to keep doing that." Positive interactions with faculty also boosted confidence. Trinity, Desiree, and Shayla all reported incidents where a professor intentionally reached out with encouragement. They described these experiences as "life changing" and "building."

Discussion and Implications

Participants experienced dissonance in a variety of contexts related to their academic experience. There was the sense that they were at odds with various aspects of academia. Because of this, many participants felt like they did not belong in the academic context. Even though they felt at odds, several participants indicated that they greatly appreciated and valued their overall college experience, particularly the community they found on campus. These two opposing feelings—belonging and not belonging—were a common thread in participant interviews.

Like previous studies (e.g., Ajjawi et al., 2020; Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; Bowering et al., 2020; James & Graham, 2010; Jevons & Lindsay, 2018), participants most often mentioned situational factors as being a cause of falling into academic probation. Bowering et al. (2020) postulated that the tendency of students to cite external causal factors is possibly indicative of an external locus of control, a dispositional factor. However, the findings of the current study suggest that this may be more complex. External factors are part of the broader context in which academic life is situated. Ben-Eliyahu and Bernacki (2015) referred to this as "hierarchical context" (p. 5). Learning tasks occur within a broad context which includes not only the classroom and the institutional environment, but also the learner's broader context of socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-political backgrounds. These countless factors directly impact an individual's ability to self-regulate their learning.

Physical and mental health, another causal factor, was frequently cited across studies (Ajjawi et al., 2020; James & Graham, 2010; Jevons & Lindsay, 2018). Notably, seven of the eight participants in the current study self-identified as having a disability. Of these, six shared that they had one or more mental health disorders. Three self-identified as having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Both mental health disorders and ADHD impact executive functioning (e.g., Nuño et al., 2021). Executive functioning in turn is closely tied to one's ability to self-regulate learning (Hofmann et al., 2012). For example, working memory, an aspect of executive function, is directly connected to one's ability to control attention, prioritize goals, and suppress negative thoughts (Hofmann et al., 2012). This finding is particularly troubling as it may indicate that higher education is not adequately serving students with disabilities.

In previous studies, institutional causal factors of academic probation were minimalized by participants (e.g., Ajjawi et al., 2020; Cherif et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; James & Graham, 2010). This is one area in which the current study diverged from previous literature. As causal and mediating factors of academic probation can be very specific to an institution (Brown et al., 2021; Fletcher & Tokmouline, 2017), this is perhaps a case of that. For example, half of the participants reported struggling in lecture style courses that relied heavily on written evaluation. These challenges may have stemmed in part from functional limitations of disabilities. However, these challenges were exacerbated in some cases by professors' high reliance on limited pedagogical strategies. Though faculty at the study site were encouraged to join pedagogical reading groups, there was no systematic professional development program related to pedagogy nor was there an incentive to improve teaching practices. It was not uncommon for students at the study site to compare their experience of lecture-based courses to "sitting in front of a fire hose." Student perceptions of faculty caring also appeared to be an obstacle to student success. Half of the participants shared that they were either hesitant to approach faculty or felt like

faculty would not be understanding if they did approach them. This is critical as research has established a link between student perceptions of faculty care and academic outcomes (e.g., Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019; Miller & Mills, 2019; Ning & Downing, 2015; Strachan, 2020).

Throughout the academic probation experiences, participants continued to wrestle with self-efficacy beliefs. Phrases like "less capable," "a failure," "not good enough," and "not a good student" were all too common. Bandura (1991) viewed self-efficacy as being central to the idea of personal agency and a key determining factor in "human motivation, affect, and action" (p. 1175), beliefs that underlie SRL functioning. Many participants in the current study had academic challenges that stretched back into high school and even grade school years, resulting in few mastery experiences. The majority also reported experiencing poor mental health, either due to disability or circumstances. As individuals with disabilities, participants also expressed experiencing stigma. Very few believed in their abilities, and even fewer experienced others believing in their abilities.

When comparing the sources of self-efficacy of underachieving and high achieving college students, Fong and Krause (2014) found that underachievers reported fewer mastery experiences and "social persuasions" (p. 261) than overachievers. These experiences also seemed to be lacking among participants in the current study. Three participants mentioned receiving positive professor feedback during their time at the study site. For each it was a treasured memory because it was something they had so rarely experienced. Having mastery experiences can be further complicated by the false belief that effort is primarily required because intelligence is lacking (Dweck, 2006; Fong & Krause, 2014). As students progress through school, efficacy beliefs and task value decline (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Patall, 2016). This is often accompanied by a growing belief that "smart students should not have to put in hard work" (Fong & Krause, 2014, p. 250), a hallmark of a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006).

Most participants in the current study demonstrated variable understanding of SRL skills. In keeping with Lee and Blankenship's (2021) findings, participants seemed to have a greater understanding of less complex SRL skills, like prioritizing and time management, than more complex skills, such as those required to write an academic paper or study for an exam. For example, most participants in the current study exhibited a limited understanding of critical study skills, such as breaking down larger assignments in steps, understanding assignment requirements, and incorporating elements of the writing process. Yet, overall, participants were detailed when describing the ways in which they attempted to better manage their time or adjust their study environment. Six of the eight participants mentioned taking steps to better regulate their time use, whereas half mentioned making changes to where they studied.

Students' strategy choices may not entirely be about effort and complexity. In the current study, Kara and Sophia pointed out that students are expected to study, but they are never taught how. Other participants mentioned being unprepared for the increased workload and complexity of assignments in college. Further, the use of some effective learning strategies is often counterintuitive. For example, re-reading notes to study for a test may feel more productive than self-testing. Re-reading can give the illusion of knowledge, whereas self-testing can reveal what is not yet known and thereby feel less productive (Brown et al., 2014). In addition, more complex strategies, like summarizing or annotating texts, can feel more time consuming than less effective strategies like highlighting. Because these strategies feel time consuming and may require greater time investment at the outset, students may not be aware of the time they are ultimately saving because deeper learning is occurring.

Finally, students in academic difficulty may gravitate towards less complex cognitive strategies because their self-regulation efforts are being employed elsewhere. As academic probation is caused by multiple factors, many of them external, students may have depleted self-regulatory resources (Ben-Eliyahu & Bernacki, 2015). This is perhaps reinforced by Ben-Eliyahu and Linnenbrink-Garcia's (2015) finding that high school and college students used fewer SRL strategies in their least favorite classes as compared to their favorite classes. They speculated that students were spending more mental energy coping with their least favorite classes, thereby depleting their capacity to self-regulate their learning.

Clearly, academic probation is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. A myriad of causal factors are at play, some stemming from systemic social and educational barriers. If institutions are committed to retaining students in academic jeopardy, they must first consider what barriers to academic success can be addressed at the institutional level. This requires evaluating campus-specific trends. For example, Brown et al. (2021) found that risk factors for academic probation at one Hispanic-Serving Institution did not predict risk factors at another Hispanic-Serving Institution.

When considering causal factors, institutional decision makers must also recognize the toll these factors take on students' ability to self-regulate learning and motivation. In some cases, this toll may be alleviated through explicitly teaching study skills, increasing opportunities for mastery experiences (Fong & Krause, 2014), introducing growth mindset theory (Dweck, 2006), and adopting inclusive pedagogies such as universal design (CAST, 2018). Given the prevalence of mental health concerns in higher education today (e.g., McPhillips, 2023), student-facing staff and faculty would benefit from increased training in supporting students. Finally, institutions should consider adopting student-centered policies that account for unforeseen circumstances. Unfortunately, federal and state aid requirements often dictate policies surrounding satisfactory academic progress (e.g., Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2014), policies that can adversely impact students who find themselves in a crisis.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it was limited to those participants who chose to take part in the study. Because of this limitation, the sample may not reflect the experiences of a wider population of students who have experienced academic probation. A second limitation was my role as an endogenous researcher. Most participants and potential participants had a previous relationship with me due to my employment at the study site. This may have impacted what participants shared or have been a motivating or demotivating factor for participation. Finally, as a qualitative researcher, I bring my own biases into the study. Though I attempted to account for them through the process of epoché, this process is not infallible. Further research can address these study limitations.

For example, one surprising finding in the current study was the high percentage of participants who self-identified as having a disability. This could be a phenomenon specific to the study site, or it could be students with disabilities have been an overlooked demographic in research studies on academic probation. More research is needed to explore if students with disabilities are over-represented on academic probation more broadly. If this is the case, then researchers need to further investigate systemic barriers that may be leading to this trend.

To further understand how students on academic probation regulate their learning and motivation, future research on this population could include quantitative measures alongside qualitative data. There are many validated measures in the field of SRL that can be used to measure SRL or motivation (Panadero, 2017). It would be interesting if quantitative data would confirm qualitative data or if there would be discrepancies between what students' self-report on a survey or describe in an interview.

As the current study was conducted in Canada at a small, private college, future studies of a similar nature could also be conducted in different contexts. As context plays a role in causal factors of academic probation (Fletcher & Tokmouline, 2017), it may be that students in larger public institutions or students in the United States or Europe may experience academic probation differently than students in a small Canadian college. These additional avenues will add to our understanding of how students experience academic probation and how institutions can further work to remove barriers to student success.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol – Experience of Students on Academic Probation

Date & Time:
Location:
Interviewee:

Introduction

Thank you for being willing to participate in this study. Through this interview and others that I am conducting, I hope to understand more about the experience of being on academic probation at [college name]. The best way to understand these experiences is by asking students themselves.

The way this interview will work is that I will ask you a few big picture questions. Please share whatever comes to your mind. You can view this as thinking aloud or view me as someone close to you—like a friend or family member who you might share your experiences with. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. I am interested in your story. That said, if there are things that you feel uncomfortable sharing, especially things of a very personal nature, you are not obligated to share them.

Everything you share in this interview will be kept confidential. You will not be personally identified in the study. However, I do want to say up front that as an employee at [college name], I do have an obligation to report about situations when I perceive that a student is in danger or is a danger to themselves. For example, if a student told me they were considering suicide, then I could not keep that information to myself for the student's sake.

Before we get started, I want to review the consent form that I sent you. I want to make sure that you understand that your participation is voluntary and that you can leave the study at any time. You are also giving consent to the recording of this interview. The recording of the interview will be kept securely and only I will have access to it. After the interview, I will create a transcript of everything that both of us said and send it to you to look over. You will have the opportunity to change or clarify anything or leave it as is. Later, I will be sending out a second email that will include a collection of short stories of students' experiences that I believe captures or speaks to the experience of many of the participants. I will ask if you agree or disagree with my assessment. At that point, your participation in the study will be concluded.

Today's interview will take about 60 minutes. Do you have any questions before we get started?

If it is all right with you, I will start the recording. When I start it, I will ask you again if it is ok that I record the interview, just so I also have a verbal record of your consent.
Start recording.

Today is _____. I am interviewing _____ at/via _____.
_____, do I have your verbal consent to record this interview?

Questions

I'm going to start by asking you some very broad questions and then some follow-up questions. To understand your experience with academic probation, it's helpful to understand how that fits in the context of your life history.

Q1. What was your college experience like in the semesters before being placed on academic probation?

Possible follow-up questions

- Were there factors that contributed to your academic challenges? Describe what these were like?
- What was it like to be in class when you knew you were struggling academically and possibly wouldn't pass?
- What was it like to interact with others on campus when you were struggling academically? With professors? With residence directors? With tutors? With friends? With family?
- What were your academic habits like?

Q2. Describe getting your academic status letter. What was that moment like?

Possible follow-up questions

- Where were you?
- What was your initial reaction?
- Did your reaction change over time?

Q3. What was it like to decide to continue in your studies?

Possible follow-up questions

- What was it like to make the decision to persist?
- Were there others that were involved in this decision? What were those conversations like?

Q4. How would you describe your first semester on academic probation?

Possible follow-up questions

- What was your classroom experience like?
- Did you share your academic status with others? How did they respond?
- What was your experience accessing required academic supports?
- Can you describe any moments of encouragement? discouragement?

Q5. What was your studying like during that first semester on academic probation?

Possible follow-up questions

- Describe your study habits.
- Describe a typical day as a student.
- Describe a time that you prepared for taking an exam.
- Describe an experience writing a research paper.

Q6. What was your motivation like that first semester on academic probation?

Possible follow-up questions

- Describe a time when you felt unmotivated academically. Did you engage or not engage in learning tasks as a result of feeling unmotivated?
- Describe a time when you felt motivated academically. What was this like?

Q7. In light of what you have shared, what does your experience of academic probation mean to you?

Possible follow-up questions

- How or why does it matter?
- Did you change as a result of being on academic probation?