

## Successful Transition Off Academic Probation: A Qualitative Analysis

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify factors that contributed to the successful transition off academic probation for undergraduate students at MacEwan University<sup>1</sup>. Focus groups were conducted with volunteers enrolled in any of the main faculties/schools who had successfully to taking time off from university, changing programs, or personal growth. Students underutilized available support services while on academic probation largely due to feelings of embarrassment and shame. Recommendations for institutional improvements centered on personalized approaches that identified existing resources such as listing resources along with contact information in notification of academic probation letters sent to struggling students. Finally, those who successfully transitioned off probation also emphasized the need for personal contact with university staff to help understand the implications of academic probation, and the steps required to successfully transition off it.

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<sup>1</sup> Located in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

### ***Introduction***

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 placed on academic probation for one academic year if they achieve a GPA below 2.0 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 2.0 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 regarded 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 serving as a warning 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 placed on academic

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probation between 2006 and 2007, only 348 returned to the university in the subsequent Fall term.

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 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 reveal probationary status to

anyone else. 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 undertake 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. These strategies contribute to the development of rapport with students, which increases the likelihood that students will seek further assistance (Lindsey, 2000).

Since the reasons students are on academic probation varies from person to person, finding effective support programs has been an ongoing challenge. However, some common interventions that have been employed include advising, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and/or overseeing of 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 on a regular basis. The results showed improvements in students' GPAs, whereby almost half (i.e., 49%) of students who took the course managed to regain good academic standing (McGrath & Burd, 2012).

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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 information on how to develop personal study plans. Of the nine probationary students who participated, seven students increased 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 effective time management, proper note-taking, and means for dealing with exam anxiety. The results were also promising as students showed an increase in their GPAs after taking the course (Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2003). Houle (2013) found that student success largely depended upon the amount of time devoted to studying, the ability to stay organized, the development of time management skills, and efforts taken to manage distractions. Programs that focus on building these skills for probationary students have generally proven to be quite 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. Prior research indicates that only 10 to 25% of probationary students elect to join a support program (Damashek, 2003). Furthermore, it has been shown that the students who are most in need of such services are the least likely to seek support (Lindsey, 2000). Therefore, voluntary programs that aim to help students with academic struggles are likely to be highly underutilized by the target population contributing little to the overall success rate of those who do transition off academic probation.

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 an understanding

of the factors that contributed to the successful transition off academic probation including experiences with existing support services. 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 to the use of 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 from the perspective of those who are well informed on the subject matter (Creswell, 2016; Symbaluk, 2014). 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 tends to be more explorative and unstructured in nature compared to quantitative research. The open-ended nature of questions used 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

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(Creswell, 2016; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Finally, participants are also able to react to and build on the responses of other group members in a manner that would not be possible in the case of individual in-depth interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015; Symbaluk, 2014).

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were undergraduate students at MacEwan University enrolled in a program in any of the main faculties/school who had successfully transitioned off academic probation. To recruit participants, an invitation was sent by email through each of the faculties/schools' student newsletter. 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 principal researcher via email. The time and date of the focus sessions were set to accommodate the availability of the greatest possible number of students given their current academic schedules resulting in five focus sessions of between 3 and 5 students in each, with a total of 17 participants.

Focus groups were conducted in a designated focus group room at the City Centre Campus location and each lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. Focus sessions 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. 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 principal 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 would be used for the report to protect participants' identity. At this point participants were asked if they understood and if they had any questions regarding confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were then asked to sign the confidentiality statement (Note: this did not guarantee that participants would not disclose information that was discussed in the session, but it did reinforce the importance of confidentiality).

The researcher then provided an overview of how the session would be conducted noting that the session would begin with a question posed to one person in the group. After that person had a chance to respond, the person to his or her right would be asked if he or she wanted to provide a response to that question. The order would continue in a clock-wise manner until everyone 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 individually in order, the researcher then asked the group as a whole if anyone would like to add anything further to the discussion. Once comments on that



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topic came to a close, the researcher began with a different individual and posed the second question with the process continuing in that fashion until all essential topics were explored in detail (see procedures section for the questions posed). Participants were also reminded that the session would be audiotaped and that the researcher would be taking notes as the session progresses.

The principal 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 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 question was: *Did you meet with your advisor after being placed on academic probation?* In which the next two follow-up questions posed 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 essential question was: *Have you done anything differently since transitioning off 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 final two questions were: *What do you think the university could be doing differently regarding*

*students on academic probation? And, 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 a response and the final discussion concluded, the recording device was shut off to signal the end of the session. Participants were thanked for their participation and were encouraged to contact the researchers 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 researchers' contact information and were reminded of the importance of not disclosing the information shared in the session outside of the focus group. Finally, participants were thanked again for their time and the session ended. Once focus groups were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed for subsequent analysis using open-coding of the responses provided during the sessions.

### ***Results***

Thematic findings were organized according to the three main research questions as follows: Factors contributing to a successful transition, existing resources used at MacEwan University, and recommendations for new resources or strategies.

#### *Factors Contributing to a 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 participants mentioned taking time off from school, changing programs, experiencing personal growth, receiving support from family and friends, changing their social circles, and changing their perspective on school as factors important for transitioning off probation.

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

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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 to similarly succeed in university. He noted that by meeting other students who went through the same struggles as he did, it 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.

For those who took time off, it was the participants themselves who were the most instrumental in the decision made regarding a return to school. These students learned about alternative programs through friends or discovered them based on their own initiatives. 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 individual factors such as personal growth, maturity, and self-motivation as important factors leading to their success. Alissa shared that her transition to success involved 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 in university. Life experience helped and working in different areas. Conversations weren't happening about these things with advisors or anything".

### *Utilization of Existing Resources on Campus*

With only one exception, students who made the successful transition indicated that they did not to utilize any resources that MacEwan University offered after being placed on academic probation. However, most participants did seek out support resources once they were already off probation. From the discussions, it appears that once students began to experience success, they felt comfortable enough to access services and resources offered at the university that would help them maintain and even enhance their academic standing. 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 Faculty of Arts credited the small program size for the positive support they received 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 okay. 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.

Mary, who also transferred into the Child and Youth Care program, reiterated a similar sentiment in conveying how her advisor was helpful after switching into the new program:

I've seen an advisor in my program, Carrie. 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 Services for

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Students with Disabilities (SSD) for providing them with some form of assistance. Robert, who also changed programs and is now enrolled in the School of Business, shared that an advisor made the transition more manageable for him by providing options of strategies he might employ and available supports he could utilize to better prepare him to re-enter university. Laura and Samantha also shared that the free counselling that MacEwan University offered was very important for them. In addition to counselling services, some students also pointed out ways in which SSD was helpful to them such as providing a quiet zone and allowing extra time during exams to help manage anxiety issues.

In terms of barriers to accessing resources and other forms of help, participants disclosed that they were largely unaware of the services the university offered. Moreover, those students who were aware of services, such as advising services, did not perceive those services to be ones that could provide assistance that would be of benefit to them in their situation at that time. Students also placed direct blame on themselves for their inability to achieve and in such cases did not consider the university as a source of help based on their particular experience. Most students claimed that embarrassment and self-blame for being placed on probation prevented them from seeking help. Mary 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 also shared feelings of self-blame, “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 centered on him viewing academic probation as his own unique 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 rationale provided for why participants failed to access 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.

In some cases, participants appeared to be aware of resources, but not how the resources might help in relation to probation. Further, seeking help was often hindered by the additional feelings associated with the status of being on academic probation. Candice put it like this:

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 of reasons 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”.

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It appeared that most participants were unaware of the range of services available to them or largely unaware of how existing services and programs might help them in direct relation to their academic probation. Lastly, efforts to obtain assistance were largely thwarted by the additional feelings of shame and embarrassment that helped instead to maintain a state of self-blame. It was only when the participants began to experience some form of success that they developed the personal initiative to seek out existing support services. Students who did utilize resources after transitioning off probation felt that those services provided relevant forms of support and additional forms of assurance that they could continue to succeed.

### *Emotional Consequences of Academic Probation*

Consistent with previous research, all participants in this study experienced negative emotional responses after learning they were placed on academic probation. The most frequently shared feelings expressed by participants were embarrassment, shame, fear of judgement, and feeling lost. One student claimed that the shock and embarrassment experienced after being placed on probation led her to question her identity because her self-image previously included the belief that she was “super smart”:

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.

One of the most frequently cited descriptors used to capture the essence of what academic probation felt like was the term “shame”. Shame was a term emphasized by participants in all of the focus groups. Sam described her feelings of shame as follows:

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 mentioned shame and described it as a main contributor to her world 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 noted that they did not want to share that they were placed on probation with anyone out of fear of being negatively 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". Participants 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". Participants in this study largely 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***

Most responses that included ideas for future improvements revolved around the initial notification email letter that states they have been placed on probation. Students felt the letter



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was highly impersonal and failed to provide adequate information on what next steps students might take to help overcome academic probation. Participants offered specific recommendations for what should be included in the letter. Jaelyn 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 to moving forward and getting off of probation instead of simply listing the facts related to being identified as on probation 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 directly 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 connections as being an important factor in assisting students towards positive 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 underlying problems and contributing issues would be helpful. She also shared that she believed that having a human connection would have helped her tremendously.

Another recommendation consisted of 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 might be effective for helping students move beyond the initial shock of the status: “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 it’s hard to face an advisor, sometimes it’s good to have someone 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 initial letter of notification should suggest where and how students can receive help by including a list of resources offered instead of leaving students to seek out such resources of their own initiative. 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 that being put in touch with another student who was in her program and previously on probation would have been more beneficial for her. She felt that knowing someone who succeeded after being placed on probation would have been very effective as a motivator for change.

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

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successfully transitioned off probation, and perhaps creating a mentor system would all be helpful additions in a process that would foster success for those placed on probation.

### *Discussion*

Academic struggles are likely to be as unique as the university students experiencing them. 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 of factors that helped them transition off probation, experiences with existing resources, 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 was only after students started succeeding that they revealed their probationary status and 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 participants were not using these resources, results revealed negative emotional responses, such as embarrassment and shame, prevented them from doing so. Damashek (2003) also 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 participants shared that they felt embarrassment, shame, and fear of judgment after being placed on probation. Moreover, students shared that being placed on probation made them feel like failures and forced them to question if university was the right choice for them. Previous research has also shown that students on academic probation describe themselves and their status in negative terms; for example, feeling like a failure, being an embarrassment, experiencing 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 contributors to 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 (i.e., impersonal and no information). Furthermore, students revealed that having contact with an advisor early on may have encouraged and motivated them to succeed during a vulnerable time. This finding is also consistent with previous research indicating that those in 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 in recruiting students who had successfully transitioned off probation but were still attending MacEwan University. Among those who expressed an interest in participating but could not be included in the study were students either still on probation or those who had low

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GPA's but had yet to be formally placed on academic probation. Also, because the present study entailed only those who were currently attending MacEwan University, students who successfully transitioned off probation and switched universities or had already graduated were not included. Focus group sessions also took place while students were preparing for final assignments and exams, and only consisted of students on probation who could meet at the same time which also contributed to the overall modest sample size.

A final 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 apply to students who have yet to succeed or those who fail to meet the requirements and are forced to withdraw from the University. Future research could expand upon this study by including those who are still on academic probation as well as those who have left the University.

## ***Conclusion***

Academic probation negatively impacts vulnerable students who do not typically seek or receive help. Support from family, friends, counselors, and advisors are all important for students to achieve success. Most participants in the present study 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 modifying the notification letter to include information on resources that the university offers. Since it was shown that students did not seek out support of their own initiative, the letter could also let the student know that a meeting was being set on his or her behalf with an advisor to discuss their overall status. 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, which not only benefits the student but also the university.

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 since probationary students are unlikely to do this of their own accord. Adding more humanity into the administrative process could be the bridging factor needed to tip the scale towards the successful transition off academic probation.

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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 the 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?