

Toward a Racially and Culturally Sensitive Renaming of “Academic Probation”

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Abstract

National data, alongside the current cultural climate and the findings of a recent CSUF undergraduate researcher’s inquiry, suggest that the use of the phrase “Academic Probation” is perhaps antiquated for the CSUF Mission and Values. The authors present an argument in favor of adopting “Academic Notice” as alternative nomenclature to describe the standing of students with Grade Point Average below 2.0.

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The following discussion provides the background, rationale, and proposed procedure for discontinuing use of the term “Academic Probation” to define unsatisfactory standing. We propose adoption of the term “Academic Notice” to replace “Academic Probation” to define unsatisfactory standing.

I. Introductory Summary

Context – The Times of the Day

In March of 2020, California State University, Fullerton proved its continued commitment to “Titans Reach Higher” when the campus abruptly went virtual in response to the COVID-19 pandemic disruption. At CSUF, concerns regarding inequities related to socioeconomic barriers to students’ ability to succeed in the online learning environment were addressed in various ways. This included, for example, providing them free-of-charge resources for internet access and equipment needs and transitioning core operations to virtual access. During this transition, however, other inequities persisted.

Weeks later, the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African American male, by a police officer, was widely circulated on video via social media. Amid other highly public injustices among people of color unfolding simultaneously (Amhaud Arberry, Breonna Taylor), these injustices vividly underscored the pain and stressors that our students of color live with – and through -- every day. We succeeded in equipping our students with the electronic devices and virtual access to succeed; at the same time, these societal pains brought into sharp focus our diverse students’ vulnerabilities.

This unique time in history creates a timely context for abandonment of the antiquated norm of adhering to a criminal justice lexicon in one of our key academic standards that define student success status – “Academic Probation.” As presented below, evidence suggests that such language has an effect on underrepresented students’ sense of belonging and perceived ability to thrive as learners and future leaders. CSUF’s Values highlight our commitment “to our rich diversity by increasing culturally proficient and equity-minded practices across all campus communities” (CSUF Mission and Strategic Plan 2020). This time of transition and hope is an appropriate opportunity to take steps to address racially insensitive norms long embedded in our administrative policy vocabulary.

Discovery

In the spring of 2020, now-sophomore CSUF undergraduate researcher Delilah La Pietra revealed a clear distaste among students for the term “probation” through her research on the Academic Probation experience at CSUF. Although hopeful and resilient, Titans who carried the label of “academic probation” often felt judged negatively for their academic performance. She recently reflected on her research project completed in May, 2020:

“Students in college are juggling a multitude of burdens, both socially and academically. When one falls behind or needs extra help, shaming them . . . is not the answer and will lead to more damage than improvement. Instead of feeling encouraged, they will feel shame. We want to build our students up, urging them to continue attending their courses and take the steps towards academic improvement. Academic Notice is neutral, and more of a checkpoint reminder of one’s progress, not a harsh punishment” (D. La Pietra, January 21, 2021).

Our Mission Statement affirms, “Learning is preeminent at California State University, Fullerton” (CSUF Mission and Strategic Plan). Ms. La Pietra speaks to this component of our mission. Learners thrive where they feel encouraged within a strengths-based, rather than deficit, context. She implicitly calls upon CSUF’s leadership to take up an exciting opportunity to learn and “Reach Higher” in our own right. It is crucial that we lead our campus, the CSU and perhaps the nation in abandoning an outdated, deficit-based and in some ways offensive criminal justice connotation to the twists in the pathways that a disproportionately high number of students of color take, in pursuit of their higher education goals.

II. Rationale and Background

a. Background: Academic Probation

The concept of “probation” in the U.S. was originally used to equate with self-improvement as a progressive philosophy in U.S. criminal law. Probationary status originated as a way of affording a wrongdoer an opportunity for self-correction in lieu of incarceration. In 1841, John Augustus of the Washington Total Abstinence Society in Boston went to police court to bail out a ‘common drunkard’ (Probation Overview, 2021). Mr. Augustus accompanied the man to court for sentencing three weeks later. The latter, now sober and enlightened, successfully negotiated a commitment to exemplary citizenship in exchange for release from a jail sentence. Mr. Augustus eventually became the first probation officer in history (Probation Overview, 2021). In essence, “probation” centuries ago carried a connotation of opportunity, an alternative to harsh criminal penalties. Previously it simply had denoted a trial period, as it still does in certain contexts such as a “probationary period” for new hires. Application of the term “probation” to academia was a logical, neutral choice of word to apply to students who were overcoming poor academic standing in the earlier history of U.S. higher education. As for the origination of the term “Academic Probation” in higher education, there is a dearth of research to identify how or exactly when that occurred.

With the passage of time, this concept has come full circle. As Ms. La Pietra exemplifies above, today “probation” bears a more ready connotation with the aftermath of criminal judgments and penalties, especially so among students of color. In this regard it is an inherently racially and emotionally charged word. In fact, a 2019 study, “Perceptions of the criminal justice system by minority and majority group university students: The role of ethnic identity” concludes unsurprisingly that “differences do exist and ethnic identity is a crucial issue in understanding resonance with the legal system” (Willis Esqueda, C. et al., 2019).

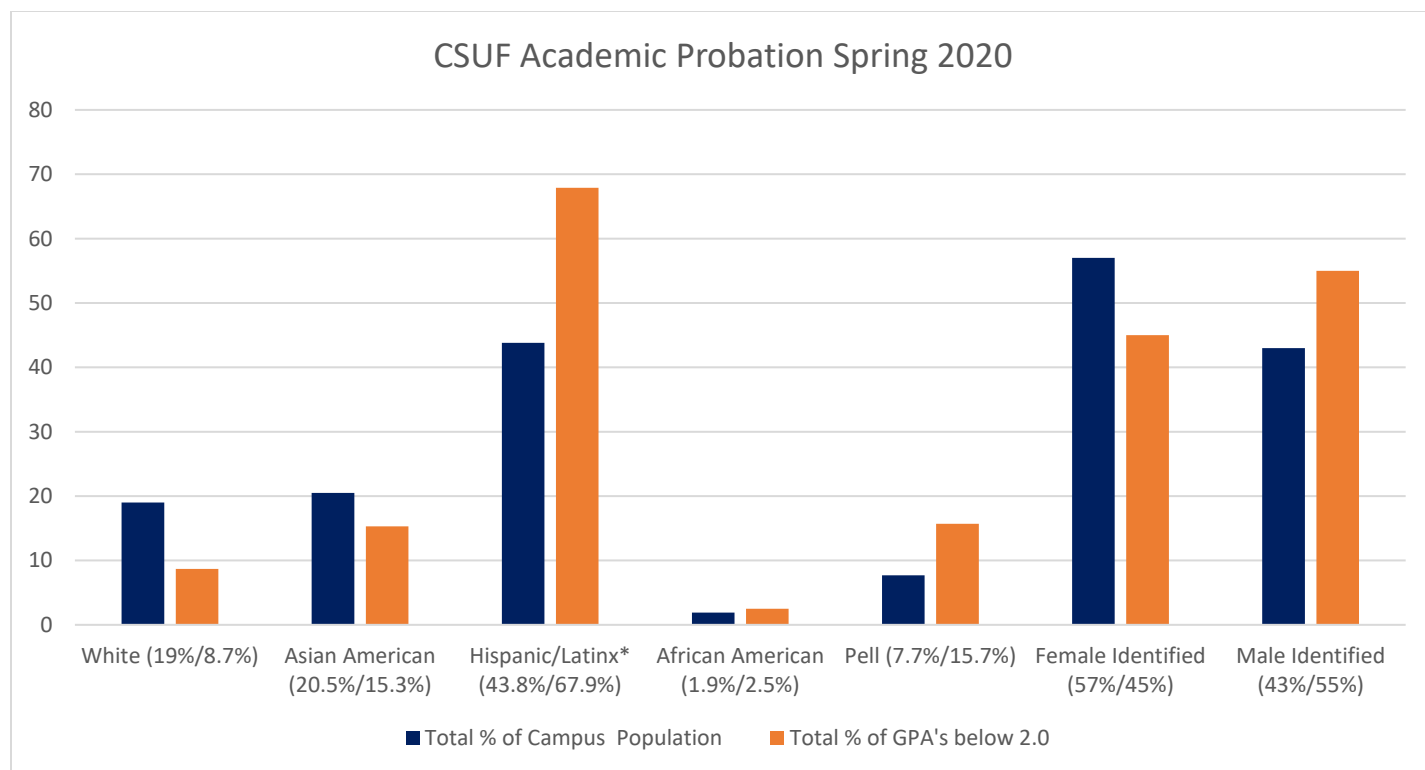
When we factor in the historical and recent events that have imprinted traumatizing images into our minds of police action upon men and women of color, *Stereotype Threat* comes into play. Defined as “a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists,” it is our duty to acknowledge the reality of this influence upon our students (Steele, C.M. 1997). Steele explains, “It is therefore critical to understand how internalization or awareness of stereotypes affects the psychological well-being and academic performance levels of Black college students” (Ibid). CSUF comprises a variety of communities of students of color, and like their Black counterparts all of these groups are vulnerable to heightened sensitivities associated with criminally associated language when it is applied to their academic performance.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics support the theory of Stereotype Threat. Students from the communities most commonly portrayed as engaged with the criminal justice system show the lowest likelihood of degree completion within six years. As the academic probation data below in Section I.b. will show, CSUF probation trends align perfectly with these national graduation trends by race:

“The 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in fall 2010 was highest for Asian students (74 percent), followed by White students (64 percent), students of Two or more races (60 percent), Hispanic students (54 percent), Pacific Islander students (51 percent), Black students (40 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (39 percent)” (2018).

b. The CSUF Academic Probation Context

In recent years, the first-time freshman cohort has shown a rate of Academic Probation, defined as a term or cumulative Grade Point Average below 2.0, in the range of 13.2-15.4%. In the spring of 2020, campus-wide across all class levels, 15.7% of all undergraduate Titans fell into this category, numbering more than 700. CSUF students of all races and economic backgrounds experience academic challenges. However, distribution of the GPA below 2.0 is uneven, falling most heavily upon Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx and Pell eligible students, and particularly those identified as male:



*50.6% of the Hispanic/Latinx students on Academic Probation are male-identified, yet they comprise just 32% of all Hispanic/Latinx enrolled undergraduates in the spring of 2020.

A 2010 study brings further concerns to the CSUF 2020 findings shown above. The authors found that male-identified students on Academic Probation were twice as likely as college women to drop out, at 6% versus 3% (Lindo, J. et al., 2010).

c. CSUF Titan Delilah La Pietra: A Freshman Peer Study of Academic Probation

Ms. Delilah La Pietra, a CSUF first-year psychology major, chose the theme of “Student Perception of Academic Probation” for her Student Assessment Scholars unit-bearing project in the spring of 2020. She collaborated with Dr. Elizabeth Boretz and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to procure the e-mail contact information for all enrolled students who were known to have a Grade Point Average of below 2.0, labeled as “Academic Probation.” She opens her research summary by acknowledging that while placing students on Academic Probation “can be academically beneficial, this study showed that emotionally it is quite the opposite” (pg. 1).

Ms. La Pietra shares findings that demonstrate the student reaction to the concept of being on Academic Probation and specifically, their feelings toward the word “probation.” She reviewed survey responses from 107 anonymous Titans, all of them having been on Academic Probation at the time of her research exercise. Of those respondents, 79% were of freshman standing. In all, 93% reported feeling “scared” by the phrase “Academic Probation.” However, the table in Section II.b. above shows that Ms. La Pietra drew from a population in Spring 2020 where

students of color and Pell eligibility were overrepresented among those struggling academically, and female-identified were in the minority.

We share the positive outcomes that Academic Probation students experience with regard to their academic standing in Section I.d. below. Nonetheless, Ms. La Pietra implicitly raises an important and timely question: Could we align the language that we use around Academic Probation with the positive, empowering support that our CSUF staff provide?

d. The CSUF Academic Success Institute

i. Positive Experiences

For more than a decade, the Academic Advisement Center has delivered the Academic Success Institute each January through April. It launches each year in the days prior to the start of Spring Semester instruction. All of the first time freshmen who finished their fall semester on Academic Probation are required to attend a one-hour workshop where they learn about campus resources and the role of their Grade Point Average in determining their academic standing. Most of all, they hear stories from their racially diverse advisors about their own journeys of overcoming obstacles when they were students. The workshops conclude with self-reflection and visioning for success, including personalized support for revision of their spring course schedules to ensure the best possible outcomes. Invariably, the students provide overwhelmingly positive, anonymous survey feedback. For example, feedback from more than 300 students collected in the January 2021 workshops showed:

- 100% “Felt encouraged” by their advisor.
- 99.5% rated the workshop as “helpful.”
- 99.9% rated themselves “confident” that they could regain good standing.
- The students provided affirming comments:
 - “Good people. Good vibes.”
 - “I felt really comforted.”
 - “I love how they didn’t get annoyed with our questions.”
 - “I’m glad I was placed in this program.”
 - “Thank you for not being mad at us.”

The word “probation” is not used by the staff in these activities. The focus at all times is directed to the concepts of success, a supportive campus community, and student self-empowerment to regain good academic standing in the Spring Semester.

In reference to the Spring 2020 students who comprised Ms. La Pietra’s research sample, 93% of them had surpassed the 2.0 Grade Point Average to return to good standing at the end of that semester. Only 7% would have been academically disqualified (Academic Disqualification was not implemented in Spring 2020 due to the pandemic). This is consistent with the past several years’ outcomes from the Academic Success Institute. The program strives to divert the students’

attention from the “wrongs” or “Probation” of their fall semester, to their possibilities and dreams.

III. What We Are Proposing

We propose a transition from the currently used official language of “Academic Probation” to “Academic Notice” to be implemented as of the conclusion of Fall Semester 2021.

a. Who, When and How?

Following investigation of campus advocacy for this shift, along with various accreditation and CSU system compliance considerations, operationalization of this undertaking will require the collaboration of the Student Success area, under the leadership of Dr. Karyn Scissum Gunn and Dr. Elizabeth Boretz, with the Records Unit, under the leadership of Rob Bodeen, Registrar and possibly with Information Technology and other units

Important Considerations to explore with Mr. Bodeen, IT and others:

- Within the current Common Management System (CMS), what would be the labor, time demand, and skills needed in order to make this change?
- Will it be possible to alter the language on current transcripts? Shall we make retroactive edits for all active students, or apply the language revision only as of Fall 2021 and going forward?
- Could there be a footnote on transcripts and related documents that shows “Academic Notice indicates a Grade Point Average below 2.0, unsatisfactory performance” or some other method of clarifying what the new terminology means, during the transition and thereafter?
- What will be the process of “scrubbing” reference to Academic “Probation,” and editing to reflect Academic “Notice” throughout the *General Catalog* and all CSUF online and printed resources?
- What other concerns or considerations will need to be addressed?
- Is the proposed timeline feasible?
- For the transition period, might there be a way to adopt the language “Academic Notice” for all student communications, yet leave “probation” on internal records, if the terminology change cannot be accommodated per software or policy limitations?

IV. Conclusion

In summary:

- More men of color face Academic Probation at CSUF than their white or female counterparts;
- College men on Academic Probation show less likelihood of graduating than their female counterparts;

- Men of color in college have been shown to carry heightened sensitivities to the presence of the criminal justice system in general, which implies the language that harkens to it;
- Stereotypes and race are tied to diverse students' academic and other college outcomes;
- CSUF students on Academic Probation have reported that the word "probation" discourages them.

These observations suggest that a departure from the term "probation" may help to eliminate the perception of criminalization that some students associate with the language used to describe their academic standing. Perhaps adoption of neutral language will in turn help to close equity gaps with regard to student persistence, academic resilience and more equitable graduation rates.

Research has asserted, "Placing students on probation involves a tradeoff in terms of encouragement and discouragement" (Lindo, J. et al., 2010). Perhaps this is not necessarily the case. Thanks to the community of CSUF professionals and the feedback of our Titans, we may indeed be faced with an opportunity to create a student experience of overcoming academic obstacles that is characterized by racial sensitivity, emotional neutrality and self-empowerment, rather than fear.

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