Identifying and Supporting Academically At-Risk Students in Canadian Universities

Custom Research Brief

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I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:

- **Defining and Identifying At-Risk Students:**
  - How do administrators define “at-risk” students?
  - How do other institutions identify and track academically at-risk students?
  - What office monitors academically at-risk students?
  - How do administrators and professors at other institutions collaborate to identify and assist academically at-risk students?

- **Managing At-Risk Students:**
  - When do administrators at other institutions intervene to assist at-risk students?
  - Do other institutions have different practices for students with different grade point averages and students in different academic programs (e.g. professional programs or liberal arts programs)?

- **Programming and Support Services:**
  - What programs do other institutions offer to support academically at-risk students?
  - Do institutions offer programs dependent on a student’s grade point average?
  - What offices or administrators oversee these programs?
  - Do institutions award credit for classes students complete during academic leave?

Project Sources

- Education Advisory Board’s internal and online research libraries (www.educationadvisoryboard.com)
- Association of Canadian Universities and Colleges. “Our Universities.”
  http://www.aucc.ca/can_uni/our_universities/index_e.html
- *MacLean’s, “University Rankings.”* oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2010/11/10/our-20th-annual-university-rankings/

Terms of Reference

In this report, the term faculty refers to an individual college or department at an institution.
I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Parameters
The Council targeted its outreach to admissions deans and registrars at peer universities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>MacLean’s Classification</th>
<th>Approximate Total Enrollment (Undergraduate/Graduate)</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Medical Doctoral</td>
<td>26,300/8,300</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Medical Doctoral</td>
<td>40,200/9,600</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>23,000/2,500</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Medical Doctoral</td>
<td>33,500/11,400</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Medical Doctoral</td>
<td>63,800/15,100</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Association of Canadian Universities and Colleges. “Our Universities.”

Definition of MacLean’s Classifications
- Medical Doctoral universities offer a broad range of PhD programs and feature high research activity; all institutions in this category have medical schools.
- Comprehensive universities feature research activity and a wide range of programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels, including professional degrees.
- Primarily Undergraduate universities are largely focused on undergraduate education, with relatively few graduate programs.

Source: MacLean’s, “University Rankings,”
Key Observations

- At most contact institutions, a formal university-wide standard for academic performance determines a student’s academic standing. At others, good academic standing is defined by administrators within individual programs. Requirements for satisfactory performance also vary across contact institutions. For example, some institutions require students to maintain a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) or above to remain in good academic standing, while other institutions expect students to achieve a minimum GPA of only 1.5. At University C, a student’s academic status is also influenced by the number of credits attempted in a term as well as his or her academic performance in the previous term.

- At most contact institutions, administrators identify academically at-risk students through a thorough assessment of grades across all courses. At other contact institutions, administrators only review student performance in historically challenging classes to facilitate more efficient tracking of academically at-risk students in a large student body. Administrators also rely on professors to identify and report students that consistently perform poorly in classes they teach.

- After identifying at-risk students, administrators typically contact students via email to alert them of their academic status and arrange individual advising appointments. At some contact institutions, administrators evaluate students’ grades and identify at-risk students, after which advisors consult with students on strategies to improve performance. At other institutions, administrators within a faculty both identify and alert students struggling academically.

- Students on probation must typically improve their GPA within a semester to avoid academic suspension. At most contact institutions, students on academic leave are required to reapply to the program after a minimum of a year suspension. Although some contact institutions offer credit for courses taken during academic leave, other institutions do not grant students credit.

- All contact institutions offer advising services and provide learning assistance and academic support programs, such as tutoring and writing assistance. Typically, administrators direct students with academic difficulty to advising services as the first step of assistance; advisors discuss students’ study habits and class choices and make recommendations for improved performance. If discussions with an advisor reveal any skill deficiencies, then advisors refer students to more targeted support services such as tutoring. Advisors may also refer students to peer mentorship programs because students are typically more willing to ask for help from and less intimidated by peer mentors.
### III. Setting Standards for Satisfactory Academic Performance

Most contact institutions use a university-wide standard to determine the academic status of students. However, some institutions have requirements that vary by faculty, department, or school to reflect differences in program curriculum. Requirements may also differ for students who have already been on probation; such students are typically required to achieve a higher GPA to avoid academic suspension. Profiled below are GPA policies across contact institutions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Probation</th>
<th>Academic Leave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>1.5 GPA and above</td>
<td>1.49 GPA and below</td>
<td>1.49 GPA or below (after probation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td></td>
<td>See page 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>2.0 GPA and above</td>
<td>1.7-1.99 GPA</td>
<td>Under 1.7 GPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>2.0 and above</td>
<td>1.5-1.99 GPA</td>
<td>Under 1.5 GPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B, Faculty of the Arts*</td>
<td>Higher than 55 percent cumulative GPA</td>
<td>45-55 percent cumulative GPA (1st time on probation) Students cannot get below 55 percent cumulative GPA if they were on probation before</td>
<td>Below 45 percent cumulative GPA (1st time on probation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B, Faculty of Business</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Below 60 percent cumulative GPA in first year Below 65 percent cumulative GPA in core classes</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*At University B, faculties use different scales to identify academically at-risk students. In the faculty of the arts, administrators consider first-year domestic students to be at risk if their cumulative GPA falls below 55 percent (the standard for probation). Because of an institutional priority to retain students from international and aboriginal backgrounds, administrators intervene even earlier (at a cumulative GPA of 60 percent or below) when these students show signs of academic difficulty.*
### IV. Identifying Academically At-Risk Students

#### Evaluating Academic Performance
Senior administrators (e.g., university registrar) or department heads are responsible for evaluating academic performance and identifying students who are facing academic difficulty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do administrators evaluate academic performance?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University-wide academic (GPA) standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty or program academic (GPA) standard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluate academic performance at the university level. Administrators are familiar with GPA standards across all faculties and can assess students’ performance accordingly.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate academic performance within individual faculties. Department chairs and professors are more familiar with course-specific curricula and academic standards and are better equipped to evaluate the academic performance of students in their respective departments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Identifying At-Risk Students Preemptively: Early Alert Programs
Contacts recommend that administrators preemptively identify students with academic difficulty and offer those students the necessary support to avert the need for academic suspension. Contacts emphasize the importance of gaining familiarity with student’s academic history in order to offer targeted academic support. Administrators may examine students’ high school records and prospective majors to identify potentially at-risk students (e.g., those with low high school grades or those that enroll in historically challenging majors). In addition, administrators also closely monitor courses in which students commonly struggle with the hope of reevaluating and improving courses accordingly. For example, administrators across contact institutions have found that math courses are particularly challenging and so they collect and examine student feedback to redesign course material or update teaching methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Year Academic Challenges: University D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff at University D contact first-year undergraduate students via phone to inquire about academic program offerings and difficulties on an annual basis. These conversations help administrators track student progress and quickly identify reoccurring challenges. Administrators oversee this initiative and provide student feedback to department chairs to help improve course content and pedagogical methods.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Alert Program: University A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professors report students with academic difficulties to department chairs or administrators in the respective program’s student affairs office. Administrators subsequently invite students to advising sessions to discuss their academic difficulties and propose the appropriate resource (e.g., counseling or tutoring) for support. Although university administrators proposed the program, each department has autonomy over how the program is implemented at the department level and maintains different academic standards for satisfactory performance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. IDENTIFYING ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK STUDENTS

Contacts explain that the method for identifying and tracking at-risk students differs among institutions depending on an institution’s structure and size.

How does an Institution’s Structure Affect Identifying and Tracking At-Risk Students?

At institutions where academic standards are fairly standardized across an institution, administrators may review student grades across all courses in order to identify and track students facing academic risk. In contrast, institutions with more autonomous academic departments, allow administrators or professors at the department-level to determine what constitutes satisfactory academic performance and to track struggling students.

Administrators at University C use university-wide standards to assess student performance at a university level. The university registrar reviews a student’s semester and cumulative GPA, as well as the number of credits taken in a given semester to determine his or her academic status. However, at University D and University B, department or faculty chairs and professors convene to review students’ semester grades in the respective faculty.

How does an Institution’s Size Affect Identifying and Tracking At-Risk Students?

Contacts also report that the sheer number of courses offered at some institutions makes reviewing students’ performances across all courses impractical. Administrators have developed alternative methods to ensure that students who struggle academically are quickly identified and supported.

To preemptively identify at-risk students, administrators review students’ grades in historically challenging classes. Contacts observe that it is more efficient and effective to assess student performance in select classes, given the infeasibility of properly evaluating grades across all courses for a large student body. At University E, administrators in the dean’s office of the faculty of arts and sciences request midterm grades from professors of courses with the highest percentage of students who either earn grades lower than a C or drop the course. Subsequently, administrators quantitatively rate academic status and combine data to identify students with patterns of difficulty. At University B, administrators in the business school review students’ midterm grades in math classes, which are typically the most challenging, to enable timely intervention to improve students’ performance.
At some contact institutions, students with learning disabilities are also classified in the academically at-risk category. Contacts observe that these students may self-identify upon enrollment to enable easy tracking of their performance and the offer of appropriate academic support services.
Intervening to Assist Academically At-Risk Students

After identifying and tracking academically at-risk students, administrators typically contact students via email to alert them of their status and arrange individual advising appointments. Some contacts find that although students do not always respond to general alert emails or take the initiative to seek advising on their own, they are more responsive when they are assigned mandatory appointment times with an advisor in the initial alert email. Administrators at University B also follow up via phone with aboriginal and international students to address students’ academic difficulties and encourage students to seek advising; administrators use funds dedicated to retaining international and aboriginal students to promote communication between these students and administrators. Contacts use two primary models for academic intervention outlined below:

**Academic Intervention: Administrator Reviews Grades and Advisor Contacts Students**

*University C and University E*

At University C and University E, administrators, such as the dean of a faculty or the university registrar, review students’ academic performance and alert program advisors of struggling students. Advisors then contact students, inform them of their academic status, and offer counseling and advising services. Some contacts recommend that program advisors rather than administrators contact students because advisors may have already established a relationship with the students in question. Advisors are also typically more knowledgeable about a wide range of support programs and resources and thus, serve as a more effective central reference than administrators are for students.

**Administrator**

*University Registrar, Dean of Faculty*

- Evaluates students’ grades and update students’ academic status accordingly
- Sends alert to advisor regarding students’ academic status or contacts students directly (University C only)

**Advisor**

*Program Counselor, College Registrar*

- Receives email alert from administrator
- Notifies student of failing academic status
- Offers counseling and advising to students and refers students to additional resources when needed

**Student**

- Meets with advisor and discusses academic challenges along with possible solutions.
- Takes advantage of targeted resources (e.g. tutoring) that advisor recommends.
- Appeals to change his or her academic status, if desired
At other contact institutions, the department chair or program director evaluates students’ academic performance and contacts students with academic difficulty. Similar to program advisors at University C and University E, chairs or directors may offer individual advising services and refer students to the appropriate resources.

**Department Administrator or Advisor**
*Department Chair, Program Director within the faculties*
- Meets with professors to evaluate students’ academic performance or examines students’ performance via computer database
- Notifies student of failing academic status
- Offers advising to students or connects them with advisor within the respective faculty

**University Registrar**
- Notifies student of failing academic status (University D only)

**Student**
- Meets with program director or department chair
- Takes advantage of academic support resources (e.g. tutoring)
- Must meet new requirements to improve academic status (e.g. repeat courses or maintain GPA)
V. INTERVENING AND MANAGEING ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK STUDENTS

Managing Academically At-Risk Students: Probationary Status

Typically, students on probation must improve their GPA within a semester or academic year in order to avoid academic suspension. Some administrators evaluate subsequent semester GPAs to observe short-term improvement, as cumulative GPAs can take multiple semesters to change significantly.

Managing Academically At-Risk Students: Academic Leave

Can students on academic leave reapply to the institution?

Contact institutions typically require students to withdraw for one academic year (two semesters). Although students may reapply, suspension affects their candidacy for the program, making it difficult to successfully reapply. Rather than take a leave of absence, students at University D can immediately apply for admissions as long as it is to a different program within the university.

University E does not award credit for classes completed while on leave to avoid the notion that students are being rewarded for poor academic performance. However, several other contact institutions award course credit to students on academic leave and strongly consider those grades when students reapply. Some institutions award credits conditionally, based on the number of credits and length of suspension, or the credibility of the institution that a student attends while on leave. At University C, students on academic suspension are allowed to take courses through University C’s distance education program.

Can students receive credit for courses taken while on academic leave?

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VI. PROGRAMMING AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Contacts recommend that after academically at-risk students are identified and advised, administrators or advisors should subsequently provide continuous academic assistance through academic support services. Discussed below are the various support services offered across institutions.

Academic Support Services for At-Risk Students

Advising Services

At most contact institutions, advisors serve as a resource for students who face academic difficulty. Typically, administrators recommend individual advising as the first step in the remediation process. Advisors meet with students to discuss academic goals, time management, courses, and study habits to identify challenges and potential solutions. Advisors direct students to appropriate resources (e.g., counseling or tutoring) to further address issues contributing to students’ poor academic performance. University C employs full-time advisors to cater to its large student body and high demand for advising services. At other institutions program advisors, deans, department chairs, and professors, may also play an academic advising role.

Contacts at University C explain that students are typically more willing to ask for help from and less intimidated by peer mentors than professors or advisors. Contacts also observe that peer mentors can easily detect behaviors (e.g., problems in a student’s social life or bad study habits) because of their own experiences as students.
VI. PROGRAMMING AND SUPPORT SERVICES

**Learning Centers**

A learning center may integrate several types of support programs, such as tutoring services, learning success workshops, and academic advising. Learning centers are typically located centrally on campus and can be accessed by students throughout their tenure at an institution. Students may make appointments to meet with advisors or mentors and register to attend in-person sessions at the center or online. The following table describes learning centers across contact institutions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Learning Centers: Types of Services Offered</th>
<th>Examples of Student Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Academic Support and Skills Workshops</td>
<td>• Skill sessions (e.g. research skills, exam preparation, reading and writing skills, and citations) • Peer helper program (e.g. one-on-one peer writing help) • Time management skills workshops • Advising • Online resources and handouts (e.g. GPA calculator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Referrals and Advising</td>
<td>• Referrals for students with learning or reading disabilities • Individual meetings with advisors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Support Programs: University C**

*Program A:* New students can attend a series of discussions during the first six weeks of the semester to help them gain confidence in classroom conversations and develop analytical and verbal skills.

*Program B:* The office of student life offers a support program to promote a seamless transition from high school to college by helping students identify their own personal challenges such as mental health issues or poor study habits that impede their academic success, so that students know when to seek for help.
VI. PROGRAMMING AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Assessment Academic Support Programs

Although most contact institutions are still in the process of developing comprehensive assessment strategies for academic support services, others have already developed methods of successfully tracking the academic performance of students who participate in support programs and those who do not, to assess the effectiveness of these programs.

Providing and Assessing Support Services

*University C: Peer Mentor Program*

First-year students who receive lower than a 60 percent average in all courses in a semester may enroll in the peer mentor program. Mentors and mentees meet approximately once a week for eight to ten weeks during the second semester of the academic year. Upperclassmen mentor first-year students to improve students’ exam preparation skills and understanding of course material. Mentors also recommend additional support resources to their mentees when further assistance is needed. The office of student life oversees daily operations of the program, while the center for student success assesses the effectiveness of the program.

Program Assessment:

The program is evaluated through a comparison of winter term average grades of frequent program participants with non-participants and infrequent participants (those that participated less than two times). Contacts report that participants performed better than non-participants, but acknowledge that measuring only academic performance may not be an accurate method of assessment since student participation in other support programs is not tracked.
The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by the Advisory Board Company or its sources.

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