

Research Note

Dominican Students During Academic Probation: Experiences and Self-Efficacy Enhancement in a Four-Year College in Santo Domingo

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Academically at-risk students frequently fail to complete their education (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Miller, Janz, & Chen, 2007). For example, in the United States, 42% of first-time degree-seeking students in a four-year university do not graduate from that school (Sage, 2010). Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, the Ministry of Higher Education suggests dropout rates of 20% and 35%.

To assist academically struggling students, institutions rely on interventions such as academic probation (Arcand & Leblanc, 2012). Nonetheless, many students are dismissed from institutions. Emerging research has focused on exploring student experiences during academic probation. Findings have been consistent with the negative experiences that students have during academic probation (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011; Dufy, 2010; Houle, 2013). Further, academic probation can undermine students' beliefs in their capabilities to perform academically (self-efficacy) (Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007).

Being placed on academic probation increases first year students' decision to leave due to a loss of confidence and self-perceived ability (Lindo, Sanders, & Oreopoulos, 2010). The abovementioned are important, as students' beliefs in their capabilities to attain academically have consistently predicted their academic achievement (Lampert, 2007; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore former probationary Dominican students' experiences to understand how their self-efficacy was enhanced rather than diminished.

Theoretical Framework

Self-efficacy is: "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Self-efficacy beliefs can be enhanced or undermined through their sources: mastery of experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and physiological or affective states.

Method

Interviews with 15 former probationary students took place at a four-year college in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. For this study, former probationary students were those who

were on academic probation previously but had over a 2.0 grade point average at the time of the interview. Full-time student enrollment in this institution was approximately 5,000. Descriptive information of participants is presented in Table 1.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews took place on campus until data saturation was achieved. The interview protocol looked at self-efficacy in the context of former probationary students, allowing flexibility (Bernard, 2006) and a structured exploration of each of the self-efficacy sources. Prior to data collection students were offered an opportunity to choose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data were coded in a first cycle, which was dependent on self-efficacy theory and based on each question in the interview protocol, then a second cycle that coded for patterns (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Results

Dominican students described two main sources through which their self-efficacy beliefs were enhanced. The first source was social persuasions, and the second was vicarious experiences.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major
Elías	Male	18	Engineering
Kevin	Male	20	Engineering
Ricardo	Male	20	Business Administration
Andrea	Female	20	Engineering
Carlos	Male	19	Engineering
Diego	Male	19	Engineering
Isabela	Female	19	Engineering
Laura	Female	19	Engineering
Luis	Male	21	Biotechnology
Mariel	Female	20	Medicine
Elisa	Female	21	Psychology
Miranda	Female	18	Engineering
Pedro	Male	20	Engineering
Roy	Male	19	Business
Jelisse	Female	18	Engineering

Social Persuasions (Friends)

Positive social persuasions from their friends within the institution influenced their beliefs in their abilities to achieve academically and get out of academic probation. For example, Mariel shared:

My friend; she told me, “I think you being in this experience and being the first time, you’re not used to this, and your abilities are not limited by this situation.” They never put my capabilities below academic probation but always above.

In the same way, other students received positive social persuasions. Hearing “you can do it” influenced students’ beliefs in their abilities. Roy shared:

Well, there were people who realized that I was on academic probation; they were in my class. They would tell me, “Give it your all, you can do it, we will help you, and do not give up.” It felt like a light at the end of the tunnel. I felt more motivated, with more strength.

Social Persuasions (Family)

In addition to positive social persuasions from friends, participants also received these from their families. For example, Carlos described hearing “you can do it” was important regarding his beliefs:

My family gave me moral support; they always told me, “You can do it, this can happen to anyone. You are not the first or will be the last. You can do it, move forward, and do not get stuck in this moment in your life.”

Vicarious Experiences (Friends)

Students’ stories emphasized the importance of the combination of positive messages, being guided, and learning from their peers/significant models. Miranda described:

Well, when I would get to that point where I could not go any longer, that I couldn’t study more, it was always good to have those friends that would tell me, “Listen what’s going on with you? What’s happening? You are in a good path, keep on going.” I had my study group; we always get together on the weekends. So if they saw that I couldn’t make it, they would get together whenever I could. It was something that helped me a lot, so I wouldn’t lose that battle.

In summary, during academic probation, students described how their self-efficacy was enhanced through: (1) social persuasions from their friends within the institution and family; and (2) vicarious experiences/learning and guidance from friends within the institution.

Discussion and Conclusion

Students’ experiences have often emphasized being on academic probation as a negative experience (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011; Dufy, 2010; Houle, 2013; Lindo et al., 2010) and undermining their self-efficacy (Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; Hsieh et al., 2007). Adding to the emerging research, this study explored the personal stories of former probationary Dominican

undergraduate students to better understand how their self-efficacy was enhanced.

Students described how messages of encouragement from their friends within the institution and their families influenced their beliefs in their abilities to achieve to get out of academic probation. It is easier to maintain a sense of efficacy if significant others express faith in the capabilities, leading to a greater mobilization of efforts and support for it (Bandura, 1997).

According to Bandura (1997), the different sources rarely work independently. After initial social persuasions, students described how the orientation and learning of others promoted a sense of efficacy in them.

Findings have practical implications for Dominican students on academic probation. Interventions should focus on social persuasions and vicarious experiences in order to enhance their self-efficacy and exit probation.

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