

“When You Fail, You Feel Like a Failure” : One Student’s Experience of Academic Probation and an Academic Support Program

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This in-depth, qualitative study explored the experience of academic probation. It recounts the story of Mark, an undergraduate student on academic probation who participated in an academic support program to attain good academic standing. His story is contrasted to the current literature on academic probation and is considered in light of Dewey’s (1958, 1938/1997, 1934/2005) theory of experience. This paper offers an important contribution to the literature on higher education by revealing a rich, complex, and unique experience which illustrates that Mark does not correspond to the typical image of probationary students depicted in the literature. This article breaks away from an oversimplified portrayal of probationary students, offers a provisional conceptualization of academic probation, and calls for further definition of the notion of academic probation.

Cette étude qualitative et détaillée a porté sur l’expérience de la probation académique. Elle évoque l’histoire de Mark, un étudiant du premier cycle en probation académique qui a participé à un programme d’appui académique en vue d’améliorer son rendement. Nous comparons son histoire à la littérature actuelle sur la probation académique et l’examinons à la lumière de la théorie de l’expérience de Dewey (1958; 1938/1997; 1934/2005). Cet article représente une contribution importante à la littérature sur l’enseignement supérieur en décrivant une expérience riche, complexe et unique qui démontre que Mark ne correspond pas à l’image type des étudiants en probation tel qu’illustrée dans la littérature. Cet article s’éloigne de la représentation exagérément simplifiée des étudiants en probation, offre une conceptualisation provisoire de la probation académique et évoque le besoin d’une nouvelle définition de la notion de la probation académique.

Authors have indicated that students as well as institutions must be held accountable for student success (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Tinto, 1987, 2007). Correspondingly, most universities develop and implement remedial and probationary programs, reflecting an awareness of the role academic support plays in student success or failure (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). Research is progressively emerging to understand the approach and format most efficient in promoting academic success. These generally focus on program evaluation, probationary students’ characteristics, and obstacles leading to students being placed on probation. Few efforts are dedicated however, to exploring the lived experiences of students on academic probation, although this should not be overlooked (Vander Schee,

2007). Given this problem, the purpose of the current in-depth study was to examine the story of one probationary student and analyze it in view of a theory of experience (Dewey, 1958, 1938/1997, 1934/2005).

This article proposes a creative structure to improve its reading. It presents the literature on academic probation, then portrays one probationary student’s in-depth story, in the form of a profile. After this, it introduces Dewey’s (1958, 1938/1997, 1934/2005) theory of experience and analyzes the case story in consideration of the theory.

Relevant Literature on Academic Probation

A plethora of literature exists on academic departure and drop out. However, there is much less work on the topic of academic probation. Interestingly, a distinction was established many years ago between students who voluntarily withdraw from their program of study and students who are dismissed (Grayson, 2003; Tinto, 1975; Vaughan, 1968). This distinction is interesting and warrants the need to attend to and conduct research with a specific population of students—probationary students—facing possible dismissal, although they do not wish to withdraw from their program of studies.

It is difficult to trace the origin and definition of academic probation. Authors usually use their university’s academic regulations to explain conditions of academic probation, however, they do not formally define the notion. Scarf (1957) was among the first to use the term in an empirical study without explicitly outlining it. Smith and Winterbottom (1970) later used the expression in a scientific article. Although they did not formally define it, their text suggested that (a) students were put on academic probation when their grade performance was below a satisfactory threshold, (b) students on academic probation could remain in their program of study but must increase their grades, and (c) they would be dismissed if they did not. Aside from students not wishing to withdraw, we understand from these works that academic probation can be seen as a transition from unsatisfactory performance to either good academic standing or dismissal.

There is currently limited literature on academic probation. Research devoted to this specific topic is relatively new and sparse. It is also generally exploratory in orientation and, as yet, lacks depth and complexity. Furthermore, much of it relies on the body of literature on academic attrition. It follows that the notion of academic probation is currently insufficiently defined. Although early literature suggests elements of definition, these have yet to be explored, explained, and authenticated to provide a solid foundation for emerging research on academic probation.

The literature on academic probation focuses on probationary students’ characteristics. Authors typically indicate that they are underprepared for post-secondary education and lack features often related to academic success, for example, commitment, self-discipline, and knowledge of institutional or faculty culture and expectations. Their lack of essential tools such as study skills, time management, goal-setting, note taking, and anxiety management are often stated as well (Humphrey, 2006; Hutson, 2006; Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007; Romainville & Noël, 1998; Tovar & Simon, 2006).

Investigations comparing students on academic probation to students in good standing indicated that those on academic probation had significantly lower high school grade point averages, worked more, had children living with them more often, and expressed more obstacles to academic success than students in good standing (Holland, 2005; Isaak, Graves, & Mayers,

2007; Trombley, 2001). Interestingly, both groups reported similar academic skills problems, although students in jeopardy scored significantly lower on a standardized assessment of study skills, suggesting that they might not recognize the shortfalls of their study skills (Isaak et al., 2007).

The literature also enumerates several impediments leading to academic probation. These include personal problems, time constraints, and lack of motivation (Trombley, 2001); procrastination, poor time management, inefficient study strategies, disorganization, and poor concentration (Isaak et al., 2007); poor preparation, employment, personal illness, being a caregiver, mental health issues (i.e., depression, stress, anxiety, and attention deficit disorders; Holland, 2005); and difficulty to balance school, work, and home-related responsibilities, problematic personal relationships, and lack of connectedness to campus life (Hutson, 2006). In view of this literature, which promotes an oversimplified image of probationary students by focusing on their common characteristics, Humphrey (2006) emphasized that they do not form a homogenous group, highlighting the importance of studying probationary students on a case-by-case basis with the objective to understand individual experiences.

Literature also centers on programs implemented to assist probationary students. Seeing as there are no policies or guidelines mandating the development of probationary programs (Lindsay, 2000) they vary greatly in terms of structure, format, and conceptual foundation (Hildreth, 2006; Humphrey, 2006; Kamphoff et al., 2007; Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2004; Preuss & Switalski, 2008; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Literature on probationary programs offers a good step in the right direction by proposing new ways of assisting students. However, calling for development in the area, Merisotis and Phipps (2000) noted that research on the effectiveness of remedial programs is scarce, underfunded, and inconclusive.

The literature and studies presented above is mainly descriptive and generally relies on quantitative methodologies, focusing on characteristics of probationary students, reasons for being placed on academic probation, and programs implemented to assist students on probation. Little research is dedicated to the lived experiences of students on academic probation although this should not be overlooked (Vander Schee, 2007). One qualitative investigation collected students' stories and sought to understand the complexity of their experience with and overcoming probation (Thomas, 2003) and offered a deeper look at the participants' stories. Effectively, qualitative studies have the potency to render rich portraits of struggling students and provide a thorough appreciation of the complexities of students' experience with academic probation. Accordingly, the current in-depth study examined the experience of one student on academic probation who participated in an academic support program.

The Story in Context

Given the above-mentioned issues and problems, the current study sought to delve into the condition and experience of academic probation. Specifically, it explored the experiences of one student on academic probation who participated in an academic support program in a large Canadian university. Each story is worthy and brings a unique color to the literature on academic probation. This paper focuses on the case of Mark (pseudonym). What is particular about this specific case is the participant's openness in sharing his story as well as his ability to verbalize his experience and his readiness to explore its meaning. Such qualities allowed portraying the richness of Mark's story and creating an evocative life story profile.

To contextualize Mark’s story, it is important to describe his university’s conditions of academic probation and the academic support program in which he participated. The university where this study took place uses a 10-point grading scale. Students must maintain a minimum Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of 3.5 on 10 in general bachelor’s programs and 4.5 on 10 in the honors bachelor’s program to be in good academic standing. As per the university’s regulations on mandatory withdrawal, a student whose CGPA falls below these required minimums may remain registered in his program of study, but will be on academic probation until his CGPA reaches this requirement. If this condition is not met after two sessions or 24 course credits, the student will have to withdraw from his program. In addition to these grade specifications, withdrawal is mandatory at this university when a student fails 18 course credits or when he fails a compulsory course twice¹.

An academic support program was offered to students who had been withdrawn from their program of study for one of the reasons mentioned above. They were however, allowed to remain registered in their university provided they agreed to receive academic support. This opportunity represented a final chance to pursue their chosen program of study.

The support program favored a personalized structured approach and viewed the student holistically by considering his experiences in both academic and non-academic domains (Vander Schee, 2007). It offered support for one term by way of weekly one-on-one meetings with a professional resource person. It sought to facilitate the student’s short and long term academic success by focusing on four broad dimensions of academic success including (a) defining or refining academic and/or professional goals, (b) improving writing skills and understanding course content, (c) developing essential learning strategies, and (d) examining personal challenges (Phillion, Bourassa, LeBlanc, Plouffe, & Arcand, 2010). Through a collaborative process, the student and the resource person worked together to understand the student’s needs and develop a personalized and structured learning plan which was revisited periodically to better align the intervention. The student was also encouraged to take advantage of the existing support services offered on campus as needed (e.g., academic writing help center, career services, student mentoring).

Constructing a Life Story Profile

Grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, this qualitative case study focused on meaning, which emerges through transactions with the environment and can be understood against the larger context wherein it took place (Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Shkedi, 2005), to explore the experiences of one student on academic probation. Specifically, the case is narrated from a life story perspective. Isabelle, the main investigator and first author, drew on multiple forms of data to create Mark’s life story profile. The main source of data was qualitative interviews, specifically, Seidman’s (2006) phenomenological approach to interviewing which allowed delving into Mark’s lived experiences and the meaning he attributed to them (van Manen, 1997). Seidman (2006) proposes a three-series interview protocol:

1. A first interview seeks details of the participant’s early experiences (e.g., regarding family, elementary and high school).
2. A second interview focuses on details of the participant's current experiences with activities, social interactions, and endeavors (e.g., in university).

3. A third interview explores the meaning of experiences (e.g., thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about stories previously shared).

Seeing as he shared detailed and rich stories, our discussions exceeded the three-interview protocol and Mark readily agreed to participate in a fourth interview. These interviews took the form of semi-structured, individual, face-to-face, informal conversations that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. One, three, and five days separated the four interviews.

Two additional sources of data were used, adding depth and rigor to the inquiry but were not explicitly analyzed.

1. Mark allowed his resource person's notes through the academic support program to be used in the construction of this profile. The first author thus reviewed and compared the case notes to the stories shared (Atkinson, 2002).
2. A researcher journal including descriptive, methodological, and theoretical notes on the inquiry process and post-interview entries was kept to monitor the lead investigator's thoughts and keep track of the research and interview processes (Baribeau, 2004; Prigent, 2000).

Qualitative case study analyses are interpretive (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). Mark's profile was created with the participant's narratives but crafted by the interviewer and main researcher (Chase, 2005). In this crafting process, the in-depth interviews were transcribed, keeping note of non-verbal elements such as pauses and emphases. Two rounds of data reduction were performed to achieve a manageable corpus, bearing in mind the importance of preserving the logic, meaning, and sequence of the story. Committed to appreciate the emergent data the main author approached it with a desire to let the interviews speak for themselves.

The life story profile is a form of within-case analysis that portrays the participant in his context, establishes themes within this case, and conveys a sense of process and time (Seidman, 2006). Creating the profile required much consideration. In this process segments that were recurrent or emphasized in the story were discerned and organized in chronological sequence and by themes to present stories that had a narrative logical thread (Riessman, 2008).

Mark's Life Story Profile

The findings are presented in the form of a profile, that is, an in-depth view of one student's life story and experience with academic probation (Seidman, 2006). Of particular value, this format allows recognizing the richness and complexity of the experience. The profile portrays the participant's story as Isabelle, the main investigator and lead author, heard it. Numerous quotes offer support to this analysis allowing readers to develop their own interpretations of the story (Stake, 1995, 2005).

Mark was a 22 year-old male student. He had been admitted as a probationary student in the General Bachelor program of the Faculty of Arts in September 2004. After the 2007 Spring Term, his CGPA was under the minimum required by his university and he was withdrawn from his program of study. However, he was given the opportunity to remain registered in his program provided he obtained assistance from an academic support program. In the fall of 2007, he participated in an academic support program at his university. In the fall of 2008, he responded to an e-mail invitation to the current study and agreed to take part in it.

Notes in the researcher journal show that the discussions flowed well between Mark and Isabelle. Interview questions and probes triggered elaborate in-depth narratives, eloquently told. He shared many relevant factual details of experiences as well as the significance of events and incidents.

Family

Mark grew up with his mother and two older stepsisters. His mother worked two jobs to make ends meet, but instilled discipline and order in the family. An avid reader, she was articulate and encouraged her children to voice their opinions. Mark described his father as a wandering nomad, who only showed stability in his life after having a child. He was fascinated by politics and literature, which seduced Mark's interests. His parents, as well as his maternal grandfather and his two older stepsisters were important sources of support, for school and future endeavors.

Elementary School Years

Not challenged or interested in elementary school, Mark put little effort into his studies. Concurrently, although he always had to attend school, there was not, in his family, an emphasis on excelling academically. Football and other sports captivated and kept him busy every recess. Friendships in elementary school revolved around sports, but Mark did not recall significant friends stating that his family moved numerous times as he was growing up. As a result, he did not establish long lasting friendships and often felt like an outsider. Furthermore, he did not recall significant teachers.

High School Years

Due to insufficient grades, Mark had not been admitted to the high school of his choice. Rather, he attended a district high school, a “ghetto school” as he called it and he could not attend advanced classes, which unsettled him: “That has an effect on kids, I’m sure, the whole idea that you’re not in the class with the smart people you know?” Concerned about his school friends and his plunging grades, his mother moved to a different neighborhood where he attended a better school and befriended serious students.

Mark had mixed experiences with high school teachers. While some encouraged him to pursue post-secondary studies, others did not challenge him. Disinterest and conflicted rapport with some teachers led him to put little effort in their classes. Nonetheless, he raised his grades as it was a condition to play in the varsity football team.

University Journey

Mark moved away from his family to pursue post-secondary studies. Early in the school year he was forced to vacate his residence room as he was accused of violating the housing service's code of conduct. This represented a major obstacle in his transition to university. He felt mistreated by the housing service, and therefore by the university. As a result, he felt like he was not welcome and did not belong in university, making it difficult for him to get engaged in his studies.

I think that, because I felt that I was mistreated by the housing, that I felt that I was mistreated by the university. . . . Yeah, so I think that really disenfranchised me and I felt I wasn't wanted here. . . . I didn't even want to come, you know, I thought that school wasted my time type thing. . . . I was reading a lot o' the required readings for those classes I just wasn't going to the seminars, sometimes even to the tests.

Mark was interested enough in what he was learning to complete the required readings for his classes. However, he was disconnected from his university as an institution and he did not feel compelled to attend his classes.

After the residence incident, Mark moved in with newly-met fellow students and found himself in a living arrangement that was not conducive to productive study habits. Other noteworthy relationships in university included a girlfriend who had a bipolar disorder and a good friend with whom he partied and focused on hobbies rather than studying. Peer pressure was an important challenge in the university setting.

Didn't feel like I belonged and it was that absolute, it was an overwhelming feeling that I needed to belong to something. And what I did belong to was this group o' people that liked to drink and do drugs, and we had a great time together, we had a lota fun together but it just wasn't productive, I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing, you know?

Feeling detached and removed from his university he assumed a lifestyle that gave him a sense of belonging although, as he recognized, it was unfavorable to success in his studies.

Transition to university was further complicated by a family-related incident. When he was in his final high school year, his mother moved to a different city with her spouse, leaving Mark "behind." Unable to provide for himself, he moved into his older sister's living room. He felt upset and abandoned by his mother and had no contact with her for several months when he began university. Tension in the relationship was intensified in Mark's second year of studies when he learned his mother had considered an abortion when she was pregnant with him. In spite of these obstacles, the relationship eventually improved and recovered.

Experiencing multiple difficulties in his first and second years, Mark's academic life became a strain and eventually he struggled to carry on his student activities. "It was painful to be in class. I didn't want to be in class, I didn't want to be there at all." He endeavored to persist and pursue his studies, although in many instances, this effort was a grueling experience.

In a few instances, he found that professors and classes were engaging. To enjoy and commit to learning, he needed to be challenged, to have some liberty in his assignments and to develop a relationship with his professors and classmates. Such conditions made it easier for him to devote the required effort and reap better grades.

Interviewer: So what does it mean to be engaged?

Mark: Uh, to have a relationship with the professor. If I like the professor and the professor takes the time to learn my name, I'm damn well gonna be handing in good papers. There's no question about it. If he knows me and I know him and we've talked about things, yeah, I'm gonna do everything I can to do my best. Whereas if I don't know the professor, and there's 240 kids and it's a terrible class, you know, he doesn't know me I'm [a number] to him you know, I don't care.

Although Mark took responsibility for his difficulties and poor academic results, the quote above illustrates that, in some respect, he did not always benefit from relationships and an environment favorable to his motivation.

Mark’s story so far highlights hurdles and barriers in the academic setting. However, through university, he also pursued a hobby with much enthusiasm, that of creative writing. At the time of the interviews he published articles for an on-line journal of Canadian politics and had an accumulated record of poems and screenplays. This evidently energized him and was in line with his purpose of pursuing a career in creative writing. He acknowledged however that, for the time being, concentrating too much energy on writing poems and scripts conflicted with his academic success. Although he derived positive energy from writing, he believed it diverted his engagement from his studies.

When he experienced difficulties, Mark did not seek help from his university’s support services. On the one hand, he lost faith in his university through the conflict with the housing services and would not turn to its services or personnel for support. On the other hand, he did not believe that he had academic-related needs, but rather that he ought to develop self-discipline and uncover a desire to study.

Withdrawal from his Program of Study

Mark had been admitted to university as an at-risk acceptance, his grades being below the minimum admission average of 70%. He was aware of the academic support services offered on campus as well as the requirement to reach and maintain a CGPA of at least 3.5 on 10 to remain in his program of study. After struggling in first and second year, he was withdrawn from his program as his grades were below the minimum CGPA required by the university. Participating in an academic support program and enhancing his grades had been offered to him as a condition to remain in his program of study. He welcomed the opportunity to obtain assistance nevertheless the anticipation of a possible failure had an effect on him.

. . . when you fail, you feel like a failure, right. And that is just a breeding ground for insecurity. You think that you can’t achieve things, or what you set out to do. Especially in university where it seems like everybody else is doing well, you know? . . . But if you are failing, you think I’m one of the people that can’t cut it, you know, I’m not fit to be here.

The quote above indicates that pending failure had an effect on his beliefs in his capacities to be successful in university. Regardless, he used the situation in a constructive manner reminding himself of the repercussions he could suffer if he allowed complacency in his life. Mark illustrated this important realization in these terms.

I have failed before, I have let complacency slip in before and I have seen what happens when I do allow myself to walk on the beaten path, you know? That I have experienced failure in my academic life when I didn’t apply myself is [a] constant reminder that if I don’t apply myself, I will fail.

Coupled with the emotional toll of anticipated failure, Mark recounted experiences that were pivotal in his process of developing self-discipline and uncovering a desire for his studies. Notably, two friends recognized his potential and separately encouraged him to apply himself in his studies telling him he had what it took to be successful. “Four months of these two constantly telling me that I can do this, and I got great marks that semester.” These discussions with these

two friends helped him regain confidence in his capacity to be do well in university and understand the importance of investing effort in his studies.

Another key experience concerned the observation of the fate of some family members who, in his view, were trapped in a “lower middle class” status with no chance of improvement. This ignited in him a strong motivation to complete a bachelor degree and reach his potential of becoming a writer. He described a meaningful conversation with an uncle whom he considered a role model. “And he just said ‘You know, you’re up here and you’re working really hard. . . . When you go back to school, remember what you’ve left. That’s [studying] your new work . . . you have to treat it like work.’ ” This helped him understand the magnitude of the opportunity he was giving himself by completing post-secondary studies. He knew it required substantial effort and he was willing to exert it.

Putting this realization into action, Mark changed his living situation to remove himself from a context fueling his habits of partying and his focus on creative writing. He ended his friendships altogether with one roommate rationalizing that they were great friends but negative influences on each other. He remained friends with another roommate who, like Mark, changed his lifestyle to concentrate on school.

I moved back in with new roommates. They’re both 28. . . . They’re very grounded guys, you know? They’re starting their careers and that’s a great atmosphere for me. . . . Because my big problem was peer pressure, right . . . not having roommates there who fuel my desire to party. It’s best for me to be alone.

Although it was not easy, Mark was proactive in implementing changes in his life allowing him to shift his attention and energies to his student responsibilities.

Participation in an Academic Support Program

Mark’s participation in an academic support program was compulsory to remain in university but he gladly committed to it. He was in the right state of mind, having made changes in his social and living environment and having acquired the confidence that he could be successful in university. The program helped him implement structure in his academic life and put in the work, which was vital to his academic success. With regards to benefits from the program, he felt that the reflection involved in the process was very useful.

When you sit down every week and write down how your week was, you really do see kinda the mental stability you get from doing well. I think that’s something that a lot o’ people don’t realize is that when you start doing well in school, you become more stable. You really do. . . . So, when I reflected and saw ‘Yeah, I wrote two tests this week and I studied for ten hours.’ . . . And it’s like ‘Man, it was a little more work but I felt a lot better at the end of the week!’ So I’m gonna keep doing that, you know?

This indicates that Mark’s reflections through the program allowed him to feel better about his study habits and to solidify his determination to apply himself in university and successfully complete his studies.

Through the support program, having a professional resource person supporting him, monitoring his progress, and caring about his success further ignited his desire to thrive. Her encouragement and the faith she had in him gave him hope. Furthermore, Mark felt that his resource person was, without a question, very knowledgeable, but he emphasized that she was a

warm and caring person and that he appreciated her presence. Their connection was fundamental in his recovery process in the program.

I think that program really depends on the person who is interviewing you. . . . Although it takes a long time to trust somebody, you know, she's just a great person. You feel comfortable with her the second you meet her. We had very compatible personalities.

Interviewer: So compatibility is important . . .

Mark: Oh! Absolutely. I think it's probably the most important thing in the program, is the compatibility between the advisor and the student. Probably number one.

The relational dimension of the support program was apparently essential in Mark's experience. The competence and personality of his professional resource person was crucial to his progression through the academic support program, as well as his capacity to be at ease and to trust her. This kindled his motivation and engagement for his studies and academic project, as eloquently shared in the next passage.

The second I met [professional resource person], she's great, I wanted to do it, I had no problem with being in that program. And I felt, I don't know, it made me want to do well, you know? . . . You want to do better when you know people are watching. And when you know that they have expectations for you, and especially when you know you can do it, you know?

Summary of Mark's Story

Mark faced multiple challenges in university such as eviction from the university residence, a living arrangement not favorable to academic activities, conflicts with his mother, and a lack of focus on his student responsibilities. Through these experiences, it became painful for Mark to be in class. He shared that he enjoyed certain classes, particularly when he could develop a relationship with his professor and classmates and when he was challenged. However, he gave little emphasis or detail to the positive experience throughout his university journey. When he faced academic difficulties he did not seek help from academic support services. The notice of withdrawal from his program of studies took an important toll on him and affected his confidence. Notable experiences, such as discussions with friends and with an uncle as well the realization that post-secondary studies represented a meaningful opportunity helped him implement changes in his life to prioritize his studies.

Reportedly, a noteworthy benefit from the academic support program was tied to its reflective component. By critically observing his activities Mark eventually acknowledged that putting in the work led to progress and to feeling better about himself and his studies. In addition, he strongly believed that his resource person played a crucial role in his recovery process. Her personality, presence, and knowledge were essential to the trust he vested in her and the rapport they developed.

While participating in the support program, in the Fall Term of 2007, he successfully completed four classes and was allowed to continue studying in his program, keeping his probationary status. He followed with five classes in the Winter Term of 2008 , and at the time of the interviews, was in his final semester expecting to graduate. He intended to pursue studies in creative writing after completing his bachelor's degree.

The story of Mark indicates that he lacked some of the features associated with academic success, principally, self-discipline and commitment, and that he encountered some of the impediments highlighted in the literature as obstacles to academic success, such as procrastination, lack of motivation, problematic personal relationships and lack of connectedness to campus life (Hutson, 2006; Isaak et al., 2007; Trombley, 2001). However, there is little evidence in his story that he lacked the essential tools (e.g., anxiety management, time management, goal-setting, study habits, note taking) usually associated with academic probation in recent studies (Humphrey, 2006; Hutson, 2006; Kamphoff et al., 2007; Romainville & Noël, 1998; Tovar & Simon, 2006).

Mark's Story in Light of Dewey's Theory of Experience

The life story profile illustrates the richness and complexity of Mark's unique experience with academic probation. It allows the reader to take into account the context and conveys a sense of process and time (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006). Although he shared some common characteristics presented in the literature, the in-depth examination of Mark's story shows that he does not correspond with the typical portrayal of probationary students as depicted in the reviewed literature (Humphrey, 2006).

To move away from a simplified portrayal of probationary students and to add depth to the exploration of academic experience, this article further examines Mark's story in light of Dewey's theory of experience (1958, 1938/1997, 1934/2005). To grasp Dewey's theory, we must first consider what he meant by the term experience. For him, what consists of an experience "includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe, and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine" (Dewey, 1958, p. 8). In short, everything a person acts upon and undergoes constitutes an experience. It includes all that has meaning for the person, and evokes emotions and attitudes. In this way, experience influences the individual's mindset both intellectually and emotionally. Dewey (1938/1997) suggested that this influence is a function of the quality of the experience, which is based on two principles, interaction and continuity.

The principle of interaction is based on the idea that the person is in undivided unity with their environment and derives meaning from each experience as they interact with their social and physical settings (Dewey, 1958, 1938/1997, 1934/2005). Some transactions have the potential to hinder further learning by producing a lack of sensitivity or responsiveness and by promoting boredom, inactivity, or a careless attitude. Such experiences are labeled mis-educative as they restrict the possibilities of having rich future experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997). For instance, problematic transactions lent by the residence incident left Mark feeling mistreated and created a loss of faith and a disconnect with his university. Such experiences precipitated negative internal conditions, which seemingly diminished his readiness and receptivity to new learning experiences in the university context. In fact, Mark expressed his boredom and careless attitude when he said, "I just wasn't going to the seminars, sometimes even to the tests. You know, at that point I didn't care at all about the grades."

Transactions with the environment also have educative potential as they foster positive internal conditions and are believed to promote receptivity to further experiences and growth (Dewey, 1933/1997, 1938/1997). For example, the academic support program's reflective component allowed Mark to recognize the benefits of focusing and dedicating more time and energy to his studies. As a result, he felt better about his studies and more determined to

successfully complete his bachelor's degree. In addition, the nature of his rapport with the resource person was key in his experience through the program (Arcand, 2012; Arcand & LeBlanc, 2011). Such transactions were pleasant, reassuring, and fostered positive internal conditions conducive to growth. Indeed, Mark expressed his receptivity to learning when he said "It was a little more work but I felt a lot better at the end of the week!" So I'm gonna keep doing that you know?" This anecdote, among others, suggests that his participation in the support program fostered the generation of new ways of dealing with his environment. Through the support process, he underwent new kinds of experiences that were less distressing and helped alter the nature of his experience with university.

The second principle of Dewey's theory of experience, the principle of continuity suggests that experience is cumulative, each experience having an influence on future experiences and conversely, every new experience being shaped by past experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997). Experiences influence the construction of intellectual and emotional attitudes altering the individual's perception of and rapport with his environment (Dewey, 1958). Mark's story highlights some pivotal experiences and their consequence on further experiences. Encouragements from two friends as well as a meaningful conversation with an uncle "When you go back to school remember what you've left" helped him develop the attitude and create the conditions to manage future situations productively. He implemented changes in his life with regards to his living situation and friendships with the purpose to focus on his studies. With the right state of mind, and eventually with the support of a professional resource person, Mark became proactive in re-creating the social conditions that suited his needs in the university context. These events illustrate how Mark's choices and actions were shaped by past experiences and linked to a purpose and to future experiences enhancing growth.

The life story profile illustrates that each transaction and experience with the environment shape the individual and further experiences with the environment. In other words, knowledge, skills and learned attitudes help understand and manage future situations. In the education context, it is proposed that the physical and social environment should be organized to suit the student's needs and capacities ensuring growth-promoting experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997), a prime issue in the context of academic probation whereby students struggle to succeed in university.

An analysis of a probationary student's story in light of a theory of experience allows showcasing the complexity and richness of a student's experience with academic probation. For instance, the profile portrays not only the struggles Mark encountered but also the importance that completing a bachelor's degree had for him, his need to feel like he belonged in university, and his determination and dedication to recover good academic standing. This story, with its details, nuance, and depth of lived experience does not conflict with the current literature but distinguishes itself from the typical image of probationary students usually portrayed.

Limits

Some limitations must be considered in this report of Mark's life story profile. Single case studies are usually not considered a strong basis for generalization to others as the emphasis is to understand the case itself in its uniqueness. Indeed, the object of case study research is particularization, not generalization (Stake, 1995). In addition, this investigation guided by Seidman's (2006) procedure was interested in what the participant judged meaningful in his experience. It thus relies on the participant's judgment and interpretations (Chase, 2005).

Significance

In consideration of the current literature on academic probation which is mainly descriptive and positivist, recent works suggest a shift towards the uniqueness of experiences of students on academic probation (Humphrey, 2006; Thomas, 2003; Vander Schee, 2007). This paper presented Mark's life story, contrasted it to the current literature on academic probation, and considered it in light of Dewey's (1958, 1938/1997, 1934/2005) theory of experience. It makes a timely contribution to the research by delving deeper into the personal experience of a student on academic probation, as promoted by recent literature. Mark's life story profile reveals a rich, complex, and unique experience and indicates that he does not correspond to the oversimplified image of probationary students depicted in the reviewed literature (Humphrey, 2006). Going beyond characteristics and difficulties, it portrays the events, interactions, and thoughts that had meaning for him, as well as emotions and attitudes they evoked in him (Dewey, 1958). This contributes to a better appreciation of the notion and reality of academic probation and helps move towards a comprehensive understanding of the experience and conditions of academic probation.

This paper makes another notable contribution to the literature on higher education by offering a provisional conceptualization of academic probation. Although the practice of academic probation is not new, it has not yet been formally defined in the literature. The current manuscript proposed elements of definition of academic probation, which suggests that it is a transition status. Specifically, students are placed on academic probation when their grades are below a satisfactory threshold; they can remain in their program of study but must increase their grades otherwise, they will be dismissed. Although it is a step in the right direction, this provisional conceptualization must be further explained, explored, and authenticated to support future research on academic probation.

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Notes

¹ The reference used to present academic regulations of the university where this study took place, was omitted in order to preserve Mark's anonymity.

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