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Benjamin P. Heinisch

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, bheinisch2@unl.edu

Nicole M. Smith

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, nicole.smith@unl.edu

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Students on the Edge: Evaluating an Academic Support Group

Ben Heinisch & Nicole M. Smith

Department of Educational Administration

Abstract

This qualitative case study evaluated the effectiveness of the Academic Skills Discussion Group, a new retention intervention targeting undergraduate students on academic probation. This intervention utilized a support group structure to provide social and academic supports to academically-poor students. These supports incorporated didactic educational presentations and interpersonal discussions relating to life change and college expectations. The case comprised one pilot administration of the intervention for three student group members. Data was collected from pre/post-intervention resiliency surveys, grade point average comparisons, journal-entry analysis and semi-structured exit interviews. The researcher conducted inductive data analysis by coding participant statements for meaning, calculating and comparing survey results, and triangulating findings. Analysis provided case descriptions and themes regarding how participating in the intervention influenced students' resiliency, adjustment, and academic performance. Findings indicate that for most students, participation in the program coincided with improved academic performance and increased connectivity to the academic environment. Evaluative descriptions break down the recruitment strategy, examine benefits of participation and address future enhancements to the delivery of the intervention. Implications for higher education applications and future use of small group interventions are discussed.

Keywords: higher education, case study, academic probation, retention, support group

According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (2001), access to higher education has increased due to an increase in scholarship programs funding undergraduate education. More academically at-risk undergraduate students are attending college across the country. Increased at-risk student populations include: first-generation students, those from lower-income families, students from a variety of underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities, and those that attended rural or urban schools with limited resources (Schultz, 2004; Stuber, 2011; Thering, 2011). Since at-risk students are often not academically prepared, they struggle, feel like they do not belong, become marginalized, and drop out or are dismissed (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011; Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004). Higher education institutions are seeing increases in total undergraduate enrollment, but corresponding graduation rates are diminishing at an alarming rate indicating students' lower overall success rates (Talbert, 2012).

Before dropping out or being dismissed, unprepared students often find themselves on academic probation. In many cases, students are placed on Probation Level-1 when their semester or cumulative grade point average (GPA) falls below 2.0. When a student fails to raise their GPA high enough to remove themselves from probation after one semester, they are placed on Probation Level-2. At this point, if they do not improve their semester or cumulative GPA to above 2.0, they will be dismissed from the institution. The Probation Level-2 students are at risk of being dismissed and it appears their Probation Level-1 efforts did not work for them. In some cases, students may be demoralized, lack motivation, and need additional help. These students may benefit from supportive interventions that specifically cater to their situation providing them another chance to avoid dismissal.

Although many colleges and universities employ retention interventions (Bellman, Burgstaher & Hinke, 2015; Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Grier-Reed, 2013), with the increasing number of academically at-risk students, an intervention was needed that targeted Probation Level-2 students. Many of the existing retention interventions focused on either one-on-one interactions between students and advisors (Bellman et al., 2015), or large seminar classes that provided little individual attention (Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Many Probation-Level 2 students have already experienced these types of interventions with little success and their continued struggles indicate that they might benefit from a different type of intervention. This precipitated the design of the Academic Skills Discussion Group.

Psychological research and practice in group therapy justifies the benefits of a facilitator working with group members to promote a supportive environment for growth and change (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 1982; Yalom, 2005). Although not technically group therapy, participants of the intervention benefit similarly by being kept accountable by other group members and using other students' stories to gain perspective on their own situation.

It is important for colleges and universities to build connections between students and their college resources and develop a college-wide community of support (Tinto, 2006). One-on-one interventions are fine, but utilizing tenets of group therapy can provide a communal process where students learn to lean on each other, which in turn, helps them recognize how they can succeed in college. Research in therapeutic disciplines and higher education practices support this idea (Corey et al., 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 1982; Yalom, 2005), but few programs like the Academic Skills Discussion Group have been developed and assessed thoroughly. Other probation recovery programs utilize stand-alone workshops and one-on-one advisor meetings. The Academic Skills Discussion Group supports students by promoting connectedness and peer-to-peer networking and provides multiple opportunities for academic skills discussions and relationship-building.

Undergraduate students and higher education professionals alike benefit from retention interventions for academically distressed students. Therefore, it is imperative to evaluate the effectiveness of the Academic Skills Discussion Group intervention to determine whether it justifies the resources needed to offer it campus-wide. Due to the novelty and complexity of the experiential intervention being studied, an inductive, qualitative approach is necessary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to compare participant experiences to better understand the effectiveness of the Academic Skills Discussion Group retention intervention for students on Probation Level-2. I have collected multiple forms of data and have chosen to conceptualize this research as a case study (Creswell, 2013). This case included the experiences of Probation Level-2 students participating in the Academic Skills Discussion group administered fall of 2015. The following questions guided the research:

1. What is the experience like for students participating in the Academic Skills Discussion Group?
2. How are students experiencing the components of the program? (check-in/out, topical discussions, student-to-student interactions, and journaling)
3. How does participating in the intervention coincide with students' semester and cumulative GPA?
4. How does participating influence a student's self-reported resilience/adjustment?
5. What elements of the program promote student success?

Literature Review

Persistence and student retention are two widely explored areas of postsecondary education (Tinto, 2006). Several theories of persistence include social factors implicating the importance of students bonding with their institution (Barbatis, 2010; Fowler & Boylan, 2010). Tinto (1997) indicated that a student's inability to break away from friends and family, failure to understand the role of a college student, and failure to bond with the institution both socially and academically contributed to drop-out rates. These tenets of persistence drive the development of retention programs in higher education with a variety of at-risk student populations including: African-American students (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013; Grier-Reed, 2013), students with disabilities (Bellman et al., 2015), first-generation students (Wibrowski, Matthews & Kitsantas, 2016), students attending community colleges (Barbatis, 2010; Nitecki, 2011), first-year students transitioning to college (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Mattanah et al., 2010; Tinto, 1997), and academically poor students requiring developmental education (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Valentine et al., 2011). Many recent retention interventions have been implemented with a variety of programmatic structures. Variations include: open-forum informal discussion groups (Grier-Reed, 2010), first-year learning communities (Barbatis, 2010; Tinto, 1997), academic coaching sessions (Bellman et al., 2015), semester-long freshman seminars (Clark & Cundiff, 2011), and peer-led social-support groups (Mattanah et al., 2010).

Social Support

One consistent finding that supports the need for the current study is the importance of helping students connect to their institution. A sense of belonging and connectedness is one of the most important tenets of retention (Strayhorn, 2012). As a result, most retention interventions contain elements of mentoring and community support (Wibrowski et al., 2016). Tinto (1997) found that classrooms could be used to promote connectedness and serve as an intersection point for faculty and student communities to come together. When students felt like a member within the classroom community, that feeling extended to the external academic community as well. Social supports utilizing listening, questioning, reflection, and empathy have been found to be important aspects in retention interventions (Bellman et al., 2015).

There is a precedent for implementing first-year seminars, service learning, and learning communities to promote social integration for students (Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Grier-Reed (2013) studied an informal social group and findings illustrated how an environment for student support and encouragement generated therapeutic and academic benefits. Barbatis (2010) examined persistence factors in underprepared community college students. The author found that for students to succeed, colleges should provide opportunities for social involvement both inside and outside of the classroom. Mattanah et al. (2010) reported that peer-to-peer

interactions led to participants experiencing higher levels of perceived social support and reduced loneliness at a large university.

Program Evaluation

Many researchers have utilized case studies to examine the effectiveness of retention interventions in higher education (Barbatis, 2010; Bellman et al., 2015; Nitecki, 2011; Tinto, 1997). Barbatis (2010) interviewed 22 participants and observed them in focus groups to learn about what contributed to student persistence. Bellman et al. (2015) administered a survey to 41 students with disabilities pursuing science education. Their measure utilized open-ended questions intended to provide feedback on an academic coaching intervention. Nitecki (2011) used document analysis, faculty and student interviews, and classroom observations to study two cases of successful academic programs in an urban community college. Findings indicated that these programs were successful because they built a program culture, handled advising well, and connected their curriculum to student career goals.

Researchers have also incorporated quantitative assessment data by comparing GPA and grades before and after an intervention (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). Others have collected data relating to personality variables, GPA, ACT scores, use of tutoring services, high school profile, and demographic information (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). Quantitative scales measuring self-regulation and motivational beliefs during a student's freshman year have found that participants had higher levels of motivation, study skills, and higher academic gains overall (Wibrowski et al., 2016).

Assessment Gaps

Tinto (2006) noted that institutional action, promoting success of low-income students, and program implementation are areas of research and practice needed in higher education. Tinto indicated, "We need research that sheds light on the types of program and institutional practices that lead to successful implementation of programs and do so in ways that ensure that they endure over time" (p. 10). Valentine et al. (2011) reviewed studies evaluating retention programs and discovered that there is a need for rigorous studies examining interactions between programs and student characteristics to determine what programs are effective for which students. This study aims to address these gaps by collecting qualitative data to produce in-depth descriptions of students, their unique characteristics, and how each student interacted with and experienced the various components of the retention program and its implementation.

Description of the Intervention

Below is a brief description of the Academic Skills Discussion Group intervention.

Goal

The goal is to provide a high-impact intervention with an environment of inclusion, community, and connectedness so students on academic probation can develop academic skills, make deeper connections with other students, get exposure to on-campus resources, share about their experiences, and receive support from peers and facilitators.

Method of Delivery

Students placed on academic Probation Level-2 receive an email notifying them of the intervention and inviting them to participate. A reminder email follows and finally a personal phone call is placed to every potential group member encouraging them to participate.

For this case, three students responded and gathered as a group to meet weekly with a facilitator for six weeks at 60 minutes per session. An additional week was included for student debriefing and exit interviews. During the sessions students discussed issues related to their academic progress and college experience. Topics varied depending on the participants' needs. The facilitator encouraged each member to check-in at the beginning of each session and check-out at the end, engaged members in discussions, and welcomed student-to-student responses to issues as they arose. The last 10 minutes of each session was spent with members writing responses to questions posed by the facilitator. The facilitator reviewed the responses and utilized these as a catalyst for discussion the following week.

Facilitator Role

In addition to recruiting group participants, the role of the facilitator is generally to provide a structure to the sessions. The facilitator leads topical discussions, mediates student check-ins/outs, facilitates student-to-student conversations, and provides questions for students to consider while journaling. The facilitator also prepares back-up topics in case students need additional academic information they might not get elsewhere.

Intended Outcomes

The intervention has several intended outcomes. One is to integrate student study skills, didactic education, and discussions on academic progress through group-directed learning. Another is to retain these individuals as students in-part through social supports and connectivity. Finding commonalities among peers allows group members to normalize their own student experiences, and the facilitator and senior members act as guides to student success. Finally,

sharing in a social context provides powerful first-person accounts, keeping students accountable, and helping them develop social skills.

Methods

Case Study Approach

Since the intervention is intended to be a personal experience for students, it was important to evaluate the intervention with detailed accounts of their experiences. With few participants, there was an opportunity to gather data that could assess the program using thick, rich, descriptions of the individuals' experience through collaboration and meaning making. Therefore, a qualitative case study approach was chosen "...in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information...and reports a case description and case themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). The case being studied here includes the intervention approach and experiences of participants in the Academic Skills Discussion group administered in the fall of 2015.

Data was collected during and after the administration of the intervention. Findings were analyzed within and across participants and synthesized into case descriptions and themes providing detailed, specific data about the students' experiences and their recommendations for the future of the intervention.

Sample Selection Procedures

I employed purposeful sampling to identify participants that best fit the research goals. I used criterion sampling to specifically select participants who were students from the same college at a large Midwestern university, were placed on academic Probation Level-2, and were participating in the Academic Skills Discussion Group. Although not required, each group member that participated in the intervention also volunteered to participate in the assessment/research component as well. Participants included one female and two males of varying academic status. See Table 1 for a summary of pertinent participant characteristics.

Table 1

Student Participant Characteristics

	Henry	Jessica	Mark
Gender	Male	Female	Male
Age	32	20	20
Academic Status	Senior non-traditional student	Junior	Junior
Identified Reasons for Probation	-Difficulty focusing in class -Problems with academic follow-through -Lack of local support system	-Lack of motivation -Difficulties with science courses -Disconnected from academic environment	-Lack of study skills -Unsure about major -Not utilizing supporting resources

The context for the intervention and data collection included a conference room on university property that was chosen for its convenience for students and was used with permission from the college. The group met every consecutive Wednesday at 4:00pm. This consistent site location and meeting time contributed to environmental continuity within and across the case.

Researcher/Facilitator Positionality

I played a dual role as both the facilitator and the primary researcher. To protect the integrity of this study, it is important to recognize my position and to utilize reflexivity to reflect critically on my roles (Merriam, 2009). As a counselor, I have experience facilitating support group therapy sessions. I believe that in order to understand a group member, one must recognize that reality is subjective. Therefore, my worldview is interpretive/constructivist described by Neuman (2011) as one that “emphasizes meaningful social action, socially constructed meaning, and value relativism” (p. 101). As an academic advisor, I have many conversations with students about academic issues. I am intimately familiar with the policies regarding academic probation. I have not personally been on academic probation; however, I have been a student member of an academic support group. To most accurately represent the participants’ realities, I attempted to bracket my own perspective during data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Data Collection Methods

Students were invited to participate in an academic probation intervention that occurred regardless of whether they chose to participate in the research. In this case, all students participating in the intervention also chose to participate in the study. Data was collected from pre/post surveys, student journal entries, exit interviews, and the student information system (GPA). Content of the session discussions was not used as data for the evaluation. While this was a qualitative study, some quantitative data (resiliency surveys and student GPA) was also collected to provide context for the case description and interpretation.

Pre/Post measures. To examine how resiliency was affected before and after the intervention, an exploratory survey developed by the university's Office of Academic Affairs to measure first-generation student experience was re-purposed and administered before and after the probation intervention. This survey utilized three different scales. The first 8 items used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Very much like me" to "Not like me at all" and allowed participants to self-report their levels of resilience/grit. Another 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" measured engagement/academic motivation (7 items), self-efficacy/aptitude (7 items), time management (7 items), and inclusion in the campus community (6 items). For the final 12 items, participants indicated either "Yes" or "No" regarding their use of campus resources.

Journals. The journaling process allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and growth during the intervention. The content of the journals was utilized during sessions as a catalyst for group discussions. The journals also provided archival records of participant observation and were used to supplement and triangulate the other data collected in order to provide a comprehensive description of student experience (Creswell, 2013).

Exit interviews. Individual exit interviews with each participant were conducted one week after the final group session. Each interview contained twelve open-ended, semi-structured questions to provide adequate guidance for the interviewer while allowing participant flexibility and elaboration during administration. These interviews were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. The questions for the semi-structured interview (see Table 2) were designed to address the research questions regarding overall student experience, positive and negative aspects of the group, and suggestions for future groups.

Table 2

Academic Skills Discussion Group Exit Interview Protocol

How do you think you've changed since coming to this group?
What habits introduced in the program do you think you'll continue on your own?
What were the most valuable aspects of the Academic Skills Discussion Group?
What were the least valuable aspects of the Academic Skills Discussion Group?
Tell me your reactions to the reflective journaling process. Was that a valuable experience?
Why or why not?
How can the group be improved in the future?
What did you think of the recruitment methods for this group? Any suggestions for future groups?
What are your thoughts on the duration of the program?
This group was targeted specifically for Probation Level 2 students. Do you think this group contributed to your progress back to good academic standing? Why or why not?
Would you recommend this group to a friend?
Is there anything more we can do to help?
Other suggestions/feedback?

GPA. Since the intervention was primarily developed to improve academic achievement, it was important to collect participant GPA data before and after the intervention. At the end of the semester following the completion of the program, with participant permission, each participant's GPA was calculated and compared to their GPA before the intervention.

Data Analysis

Pre/post-intervention measures and GPA. With only three total participants and one stage of repeated measures, this qualitative study was not suited for extensive statistical analysis. However, there were certain concrete, quantifiable aspects that contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the program's academic impact. Responses on each pre- and post-survey were given a numerical value (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 on the Likert scales and 1 or 0 on the "Yes/No" scale) with higher values representing higher levels of self-reported resilience, motivation, aptitude, time management, engagement, and use of campus resources. Total response scores were compared across participants and the percentage of increase in scores was calculated. In a similar fashion, pre- and post-semester GPAs were also calculated.

Exit interviews and journals. A systematic approach was employed to understand the essence of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). After an in-depth review of the exit interview transcripts, a comprehensive list of every participant's responses line

by line was compiled under each interview question. Journals were analyzed in a similar fashion. Significant statements in the interviews and journals were identified and listed with an equal importance placed on each. This provided a balanced and equal value to each participant perspective (Merriam, 2009). Individual meanings and thematic qualities were considered and the responses distilled down to 74 meaning units/theme statements. Considering the context of each meaning unit, theme statements emerged into three main categories: Recruitment, Benefits, and Changes Needed. The categories diverged into nine sub-categories. Under each sub-category, the theme statements were synthesized into paragraphs to produce the essence of the experience.

Ethical Considerations

It was imperative to protect the identity and confidentiality of the research participants and provide a transparent process that accurately documented their experiences. IRB approval was received prior to data collection and no participant identifying information was used in the reporting of data. Identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports during data analysis and pseudonyms were used during reporting phases of the project. Informed consent was crucial to the participants' understanding of the project and helped clarify their rights as participants.

Findings

GPA and Pre/Post-Intervention Measures

It was important to consider individual differences between participants to describe their experiences in more detail. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.

Henry. Henry had the lowest gains in GPA (18.6% increase: from 1.897 to 2.25) and his scores on the pre- and post-survey were comparable. After the intervention, the survey showed that Henry utilized 2 more campus resources after the intervention: the Scholarships and Financial Aid office, and first year transition workshops. He also improved his time management. He now felt he knew how to manage his time, more often planned his week out in advance, and wasted less time before deadlines.

Jessica. Similar to Henry, Jessica's total survey scores were comparable before and after the intervention. However, she had a 42.2% increase in her GPA (from 1.473 to over 2.0). Jessica started with the lowest GPA of the participants and raised it above the minimum she needed to be placed back in good standing. After the intervention, Jessica reported an increase in resilience. She believed she was more diligent, stayed with ideas longer before losing interest, and maintained her focus on long-term projects. She also used an additional campus resource after the intervention: first year transition workshops.

Mark. Mark had the largest increases in his GPA and survey scores. His semester GPA increased 76.5% (from 1.7 to 3.0), well over what he needed to return to good standing. He also increased his survey scores in every single category most notably in motivation, time management, and utilizing campus resources. After the intervention, Mark felt more motivated. He found himself wanting to do as well as he could in his classes, found it easier to motivate himself to study, claimed to set goals for grades he wanted in his classes, studied more than the minimum to pass, and was ready to do whatever it took to succeed. His time management also improved. Mark believed he now knew how to manage his time, wasted less time before deadlines, and found it easier to stick to his study schedule. After the intervention, Mark utilized 3 additional campus resources: first year transition workshops, money management resources, and peer-mentoring.

Exit Interview and Journal Synthesis

Overall, students were very positive about their experience in the group. Below is a synthesis of participants' pertinent journal entries and exit interview responses. Themes emerged into three categories: recruitment, benefits of the program, and suggested changes to the program. Several sub-themes also emerged and are discussed below.

I. Recruitment. Overall, students felt that the recruitment measures used (emails and phone calls) should have been an effective way to recruit participants. Jessica appreciated the message that was left, and Mark participated only after speaking with the facilitator on the phone. When asked, every student indicated that getting a message from their academic advisor would have been a great incentive. Two students mentioned that they prioritize reading emails from their advisor, and Henry mentioned it would be beneficial if the advisor says,

‘Hey, I know you’re my advisee but you need to talk to this person, he has this group going on, I could either schedule you for all these classes or you can sit down and have one on one help or small group help which would be more beneficial’.

II. Benefits. Students mentioned several benefits to their participation in the program. Every participant claimed they would recommend the group to a friend and indicated that because it was so personalized, the group intervention could have applied to a variety of group types. Benefits included: positive changes for students after the program, its contribution to their academic progress, the support they felt in the group, the value added with journaling, and the flexible nature of the format.

1. Positive changes. Henry's first response indicated he was not sure how much he changed, however he claimed to have acquired some new information. Mark used the group to keep him accountable, “I use it as a weigh point throughout the week to make sure I have something done by Wednesday or after Wednesday”. Jessica felt more motivated to change how

she was handling her schoolwork. Two particular areas of discussion impacted the students: lifestyle change and campus resources.

Lifestyle change. Two students indicated that the lifestyle change discussion really resonated with them and they recognized it as crucial to their success. Jessica stated, "...I know that getting back into good academic standing...you have to make a lifestyle change and reevaluate everything you've done up until this point and how it's not working." The discussion helped Henry realize his difficulty with lifestyle change in the past and talking about it made the process of change more real.

Campus resources. Every participant mentioned the benefits of campus resources and how the group helped them recognize what is being provided for them. Jessica mentioned, "I just think I've learned more about what's available at the university so I think I've changed in terms of I'll actually use the resources that we talked about." Henry noted the importance of meeting with his advisors and professors on a regular basis.

That class I'm having a little difficulty in but sitting down and discussing it [with my instructor], I know I'm still in a good position to pass and still be on top of everything and get a good grade so...it's a matter of not being embarrassed when I screw up but looking for the help from the teachers when I need it.

Once he realized that getting help is ok, Henry realized that his instructors and advisors were very beneficial. The students also appreciated being reminded that they are already paying for services offered on campus with their student fees, and this motivated them to utilize those services.

2. Contribution to academic progress. One of the principle aims was to help high-stakes probation students get back to good academic standing. The students unanimously agreed that participation contributed to their academic progress. Participants claimed to take this program more seriously than the pre-set activities that were offered to them in previous semesters, in part because of the personal nature of the experience. One student mentioned, "I think this is the best thing I've seen so far for helping students on probation." Another said, "I think I'm finally back on track to a successful end of the year at [Midwestern University]." Being in the group reminded them that academic success is incremental and their efforts will pay off, even if they don't see it right away.

3. Supportive group environment. One key to the success of the program was the supportive group environment provided. Some comments included:

"It was nice obviously being in a group of other people so you could see that you're not just alone on probation two."

"It's just comforting to know that you're not the only person doing it."

"I'll probably continue sharing more in group settings."

"It helped me with getting help from others and getting different opinions."

Students recognized they were helping others and appreciated their role in the group. They liked that everyone pitched in together and became accountable to each other. Support from the group gave them a sense of purpose and hope. Henry liked that the group was not all about giving advice, because that can be subjective. He appreciated that one of the main aspects of the group was providing support to each member. He liked the personalized aspects and the fact that, “Hey somebody cares about whether I succeed or I fail. Somebody wants me to succeed.” Mark liked the fact that there was a facilitator who could direct conversations, but was not always leading the conversation. Jessica indicated just how important it was to participate in the group together,

I guess my problem is that I just have anxiety so I was thinking that it was just me doing this alone and that no one else was having this problem and I was going to get dismissed from the university and it was all out of my control. It just was spiraling and then knowing that there were at least two other people kind of going through the same thing with their academics and it was better.

The normalization and support provided by the group setting was the difference between her Probation Level-1 experience and her time with the Academic Skills Discussion Group.

4. *The value of journaling.* During the final 10 minutes of each session, group members were asked to provide a one-page response to a question posed for them to reflect on. Their responses were shared the following week and discussed. Every member of the group mentioned how this was valuable and that it contributed to their progress. Henry indicated that it helped him conceptualize his thoughts by putting them down on paper. This helped him “poke holes” in some of his rationalizing thought processes. Students felt writing things down and coming back to them helped them come to terms with what they were thinking about. Mark indicated that,

I think that it’s an important part that should continue because it’s getting people to write out what they’re thinking, maybe they might not say it all when you discuss it, but they’re writing down what they are thinking about, whatever’s going on, and so I think it’s beneficial to the group members on how the group goes.

III. Recommended changes. Two of the three students indicated that every element of the group was favorable including the topics, organization, and implementation. The students were happy with their overall experience and would be fine if nothing changed. However, there were a few suggestions, which emerged as the following categories: it was not long enough, the group needed more members, and the format needed tweaking.

1. *It was not long enough.* The most common criticism was the duration. While these students were busy studying, working, and going to class; surprisingly, they wanted to spend more time in the group sessions. Every student asked for either more sessions or more time during the sessions. Henry felt the study habit adjustments students needed would take more time than the six weeks allotted. He and Mark both suggested adding at least two more sessions. Mark said, “I wouldn’t have minded [two more sessions], because like I said, it’s kind of a weigh

point in the week; something that was always on the schedule, so I didn't really mind it." The group size was also considered, and with a potential group larger than three, there would be less time to talk and more session time would be needed. Conversations were taking too long to develop and by the time things were really rolling the time was almost up.

2. *The group needed more members.* Students often reflected "How would it have been with a larger group?" Every participant indicated that it would have been nice to have at least one or two more people in the group. Jessica noted "I think that our discussions would have been even longer and better with more people." Henry mentioned that there were probably some students that would have participated had their schedules not conflicted, and maybe this should be a consideration for future sessions.

3. *Consider a more flexible format.* While students appreciated having time with their peers, some of them wanted additional one-on-one time with the facilitator. Mark recommended:

I know that I would stop after the meeting and talk to you several times and so I think letting the group, if it's possible, that there is always one-on-one possibilities to talk if they don't want to talk about it in the group.

Similarly, Henry wanted both a bigger group in addition to more one-on-one time with a facilitator. He also suggested that more groups with more facilitators would offer more options for students with schedule conflicts. Jessica also indicated that she would have considered attending a different group at a different time on a week that she had a one-time scheduling conflict.

Emergent Findings

Findings from the pre/post measures, GPA changes, exit interviews, and journal entries tell a story about each participant.

Henry. Henry, a 32-year-old non-traditional student with difficulties following through with his academic work, was initially not sure how the group had changed him. His low GPA increase and relatively low survey increases support that idea, although there were still improvements in both areas. Counter to his classroom experiences, Henry did attend all the sessions and was conscientious and followed through with the responsibilities of the program. He felt very much like a leader in the group and found his role as more of an idea-person for the other members of the group than as a participant benefitting from the other students.

Jessica. Jessica was a 20-year-old junior with a lack of motivation and a feeling of disconnection to campus. Jessica's survey scores did not change much but her GPA increase was much more pronounced than Henry's. Based on her scores, journal entries, and comments during the exit interview, Jessica benefitted mainly from the social aspects of the group. She gained a sense of connection to campus through relationships with group members. Many of the

academic topics were unchanged on her survey responses, but her statements reflected that she highly valued having an experience where she was not alone.

Mark. Mark was a 20-year-old junior lacking study skills and an academic direction. Mark was unsure about his major and conversations in the sessions helped him decide to change his major to find a better academic fit. Mark had the most pronounced increase in scores and his comments in the exit interview reflected that this group helped him find his academic purpose and allowed him to gain new perspective on his academic experiences. This explains why his academic motivation score increased 47.4%. Mark benefitted from both the social aspects and the topical discussion aspects of the group.

Discussion

Based on this case study, the Academic Skills Discussion Group was a valid experience that succeeded in most of the things it set out to do. It was a retention intervention consistent with much of the higher education student retention literature. It targeted academically-poor students on the edge of dismissal (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Valentine et al., 2011), focused on social aspects of the student experience (Barbatis, 2010; Bellman et al., 2015; Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Grier-Reed, 2013; Tinto, 1997), created opportunities for peer-to-peer connectivity (Mattanah et al., 2010), and provided opportunities for students to relate to a university staff member (Wibrowski et al., 2016).

Results indicated that students improved their academic motivation and increased their study knowledge. All participants appreciated the experience, benefitted academically, and wanted more. Every student's grade-point average increased, to which the Academic Skills Discussion Group may have been a contributor. While self-reported resilience scores varied in intensity of change, every student reported social and/or academic benefits from the intervention. Results indicated that lifestyle change was an important element to discuss with this population. Students could understand concrete steps and begin working to change their non-productive study habits or other behaviors and lifestyles that were hindering their academic success. Both survey responses and exit interview responses reflected that participation elicited increased engagement with their institution.

Several unique elements of the program emerged as beneficial for academically at-risk students including: check-in, topical discussions, peer-to-peer feedback, facilitator contribution, and journaling. Findings indicated that students valued different aspects of the program and their outcomes varied based on their unique experiences of the intervention. Henry's status as an older student may have influenced how he experienced his role as a leader. He appreciated the chance to share during the peer-to-peer feedback component. Jessica's need for connectivity

may have helped her respond more positively to the social aspects of the program. Mark's uncertainty about a major may have influenced how he experienced the life change discussions. Mark particularly benefitted from the topical discussions.

One of the less successful elements of the intervention was the recruitment process. Although the students felt the methods were appropriate, it only resulted in three total participants, not the six to eight that would have been more ideal for discussion purposes (Yalom, 2005). It was difficult to reach non-engaged students, even if the program being offered would be highly beneficial for them.

Consistent with the Literature

As a rigorous study that examined interactions between a retention program and student characteristics, this project addressed the assessment gaps in higher education retention programs identified by Tinto (2006) and Valentine et al. (2011). The findings support theories of persistence that highlight the importance of students bonding to their institution (Barbatis, 2010; Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Tinto, 1997). This study's participants benefitted from their interactions with both the facilitator and other members of the group, which led to an increased likelihood of their persistence that semester. The findings related to these social support benefits are consistent with the report of Mattanah et al. (2010) who found that peer-to-peer interactions increased participant perceived social support and reduced loneliness. The participants of the Academic Skills Discussion Group increased their connection to campus, which according to the work of Strayhorn (2012) is an important aspect of retention, one of the main goals of this intervention. This is consistent with the findings of Wibrowski et al. (2016) and supports their recommendation that most retention interventions should contain elements of mentoring and community.

With findings consistent to persistence and retention literature, this study confirms that qualitative case study methodology (Creswell, 2013) can be used to effectively evaluate a higher education retention intervention. Triangulating and comparing data from pre- /post-surveys, GPA, student interviews, and journals proved to be an effective way to gain insight into how students were interacting with the various elements of the program and is recommended for future evaluations.

Limitations

Although the literature supported this type of intervention and its subsequent evaluation, the results are limited by certain elements of the program and study design. For instance, the number of participants was limited at three. Both the group intervention and the evaluative study would have benefitted from an increased participant pool, ideally including six to eight participants. In addition, the GPA data included variables not controlled for, such as courses

taken, which made it impossible to draw deep inferences about the effects of the program. Furthermore, the students participating only represented one college at the university. A collection of participants with a wider variety of academic programs may have produced more transferrable results. Another limit to the study was that only interviews, journal entries, pre/post measures, and GPA scores were used for data collection. The use of observational data may have produced more comprehensive results. Moreover, reliability of the interpretation was limited due to the single researcher/facilitator reviewing the data. In future studies, a collaborating researcher could be brought in to corroborate findings. Finally, while the exit interview was designed as a validation procedure for the intervention itself, the study would have benefitted from further member-checking to validate the findings of the study as a whole.

Implications for Practice

The number of at-risk students entering higher education is increasing and resource allocation to retention efforts are becoming more necessary (Schultz, 2004; Stuber, 2011; Thering, 2011). According to this case study, the Academic Skills Discussion Group intervention is effective. One main limitation of the program's current iteration is the large amount of resources it requires. One staff member working for at least seven weeks, with many hours required for planning and implementation, only to impact the academic experience of three students is relatively inefficient. Colleges should consider this intervention, but only if they want to dedicate the resources to it. Scalability may be an issue, because according to this pilot study, the attributes of this group only manifested in a small number of participants. Traditionally, the benefits of group therapy are reduced as the number of group members grows past the ideal six to eight (Yalom, 2005). To address this, a college could have multiple groups meet in one location and have a facilitator oversee multiple groups.

Recruitment is another issue that faces administrators of this program. Although the participants felt the recruitment methods were adequate, having a student's academic advisor recommend the group to students would be welcome. This would encourage students to participate who may be less inclined to engage at the college-level. Due to FERPA restrictions, it was not possible to make this a requirement for students on Probation Level-2 as they would be involuntarily sharing their academic standing with others. Therefore, the challenge was getting less-engaged students to volunteer their time to an intervention they knew very little about. A college with a larger pool of Probation Level-2 students would have an increased likelihood of putting together a group large enough to maximize the resource allocation required of the program.

Future Directions

The Academic Skills Discussion Group will be offered during subsequent academic semesters. Based on this pilot case study findings, revisions have been made to the intervention. Moving forward, the recruitment process will utilize a pre-written letter sent to academic advisors for them to send to their Probation Level-2 students to encourage their participation. Advisor contact would help normalize the group for those unaware of it. Adding more sessions (from six to eight) would address the participants' desire for more time. Additional groups, increased one-on-one time with the facilitator, and lengthening the sessions could also benefit future interventions. Regarding the program evaluation, a future assessment could be framed as a concurrent mixed methods approach (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). With more participants one could utilize analysis of variance or linear regression modeling for more comprehensive quantitative data collection methods. Including multiple researchers and incorporating member-checking would also be appropriate additions to address reliability and validity. With proper administration, this intervention and its evaluative component could be used on a larger scale across the entire university. It would require multiple facilitators and possibly a facilitator-training seminar. Scalability would be an important consideration regarding allocation of resources and a future study could look at having 20-30 students per group to see if similar results occur.

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