

 LEADING STRATEGIES

The Impact of Interventions for Students Readmitted After Academic Suspension

By Kristin Woods, Deirdre Heistad, and Megan Vogt-Kostner

Student data associated with the academic suspension and readmission process at the University of Northern Iowa revealed a number of equity and student persistence issues, highlighting the need to make systemic improvements including the introduction of new data-informed interventions. This article focuses on access and equity issues identified in a review of students who were academically suspended from the University of Northern Iowa, the steps that faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals across campus took in response to these data, and student outcomes after the implementation of process and program changes.

The intervention relies on a cross-divisional approach to addressing the challenges of equity within suspension practices and reframing suspension from a narrative of discipline to one of support. Improvements highlighted include changes to the suspension policy, updated criteria associated with readmission after suspension, and a new post-readmission course and success coaching intervention. Outcomes data will reveal equity-related gains in retention and persistence for students readmitted after suspension, and areas in need of ongoing improvement.

Colleges and universities have long applied academic probation and suspension status to students who have performed poorly in their cumulative coursework. Students placed on academic suspension are commonly required to take a semester or more away from the institution before continuing their enrollment. This

combination of poor grades and an involuntary delay in academic progress creates a significant barrier to degree completion for affected students, and raises institutional concerns about retention and student success.

Approximately 8 percent of bachelor's degree recipients are placed on academic probation at some point

in their undergraduate experience (Brady, *et al.* 2012; Thomsen, Peterson, and Velez 2020), and students who are placed on academic probation are significantly less likely to graduate than their peers who do not encounter probation (Bowman and Jang 2022). To address this area of concern, colleges and universities often respond by encouraging or requiring students on academic probation and/or those returning from academic suspension to participate in educational interventions designed to help them return to good standing.

This article provides broad context related to academic suspension practices and their outcomes, and then details the academic suspension and readmission process at one university, including the inequitable outcomes revealed in a review of students who progressed through the system. Next, the article reports on new policies and interventions designed at this university to better support students returning from academic suspension, and the post-intervention outcomes.

Literature Review

Institutions of higher education typically place students with a cumulative GPA below 2.0 on academic probation, and then on academic suspension if their cumulative GPA persists below 2.0 in the subsequent term. A range of factors contribute to students' academic outcomes in postsecondary education, including: pre-college characteristics such as academic preparedness (Hepworth, Littlepage, and Hancock 2018); high school type (Tomul and Polat 2013); parental education (Wolniak and Engburg 2010); prior academic achievement (García-Ros, *et al.* 2019); academic self-efficacy (Cassidy 2012; Krumrei-Mancuso, *et al.* 2013; Robbins, *et al.* 2004); and during-college behaviors and experiences, such as attention to study (Krumrei-Mancuso, *et al.* 2013), willingness to seek support (Carter 2013), personal emotional adjustment (Schwartz and Washington 2002), engagement with faculty (Moser 2013; Pascarella 1980; Ullah and Wilson 2007), living on campus (Gaskins 2009), mentoring relationships (Fox, *et al.* 2010) and various informal connections with peers in the college setting (Jain and Kapoor and 2015).

Inequity exists in students' experiences of higher education as evidenced by systemic and demographic factors that are negatively associated with student academic performance, including financial need and first-generation status (Gaskins 2009), lower quality high school infrastructure, exposure to violence (Wolniak and Engburg 2010), children in the home, and more work hours (Trombley 2000). Students of color, especially Black men, are significantly more likely to encounter academic suspension (Goldman, Blackwell, and Beach 2003).

When students encounter sustained academic difficulty through and beyond probation for this range of complex reasons, they are forced to navigate the suspension process and, in some cases, a mandatory waiting period before readmission and persistence to degree completion. These students who leave the institution involuntarily due to poor academic performance can be classified as stop-outs—students who leave for a time and then ultimately re-enroll—or as drop-outs—students who leave but do not return to complete their degree (Hoyt and Winn 2004).

There has been some qualitative work indicating that academically suspended students felt that continuity was critical to their ability to succeed at the university, as opposed to pausing for a mandatory waiting period (Versalle 2018), while some quantitative work has found no relationship between length of suspension period and subsequent academic outcomes (Meadows and Tharpe 1996). Students describe an often-painful period of critical reflection upon encountering suspension, which for students ultimately successful in returning the university, led to intentional efforts to grow in both competence and confidence (Suchan 2016). Whether through a formal reapplication process, or simply re-registration after a designated waiting period, students returning after suspension must find a way to address concerns that contributed to poor academic performance and make meaningful improvements. Qualitative studies exploring the experiences of students who successfully persisted after academic suspension highlight that factors such as perseverance, maturation (Carter 2013), support from family and

friends, being forced to stop and reflect on their situation, and a conscious decision to change habits (Hoell 2006) were important to their success after returning from suspension.

Credit-bearing success courses designed for students on academic probation or suspension have been associated with increased rates of return to good academic standing, persistence and graduation rates (Leon, *et al.* 2019; McGrath and Burd 2012), and higher grade point averages (Hanger, *et al.* 2011). Mandatory courses are invasive by design, a characteristic of post-suspension intervention that students have cited as important (Carter 2013). In a qualitative study of students readmitted early after suspension at Western Michigan University, themes emerged indicating that a readmission course and associated readmission program contributed to positive changes in student attitudes and behaviors toward school, including increased use of academic resources, better organization and time management, improved personal and study habits, and increased personal connections and accountability (Versalle 2018).

Review of Academic Standing Policies

During the 2017–18 academic year, the University of Northern Iowa’s (UNI) administration requested a review of the current policies related to student academic standing on campus, with a focus on inequalities related to suspension and readmission practices. At the institution, academic probation and suspension are defined in the following way:

- **Academic Probation:** “Any first-semester student who has a UNI term GPA below 1.00 will be placed on Academic Probation. Also, any continuing student will be placed on Academic Probation when their UNI cumulative GPA is below a 2.00. A student placed on Academic Probation must earn a minimum UNI term GPA of 2.00 for each semester while on Academic Probation until their UNI cumulative GPA reaches 2.00 or higher.” (UNI 2022, 1)
- **Academic Suspension:** “A student on Academic Probation who fails to earn a UNI term GPA of 2.00 will be placed on Academic Suspension. Academic

Suspension is for a minimum period of one academic semester and is permanently noted on the student’s official academic transcript. Once suspended, a student will not be allowed to re-enroll at the University of Northern Iowa until they have been academically reinstated.” (UNI 2022, 1)

The policy noted that if a student was placed on academic probation they were given the opportunity to increase their grades throughout that semester and were still allowed to enroll at the institution. In contrast, students placed on academic suspension were given two options: (1) complete an application for early readmission from academic suspension with the possibility of returning immediately to the institution, or (2) sit out from the institution for one year before returning to the university on continued probation. With the first option, students completed an application questioning extenuating circumstances related to their suspension (academic factors, personal/family factors) and presented themselves in front of a committee of faculty and staff to discuss how they planned to better their academic performance. Students were then reviewed through a holistic lens rather than on specific criteria. With the second option, students were required to wait a year before returning to the institution with hopes that the individual might attend a community college during this time to better prepare themselves for returning to the university.

With this information, the UNI Taskforce on Academic Probation & Suspension (TAPS) reviewed the existing policy to determine if it aligned with the institution’s goal of supporting student success rather than punishing students for poor academic progress as well as considered alternative practices if the first was found to be untrue. After collecting initial data regarding the academic standing policy, TAPS found that when compared to institutional peers, UNI’s suspension period of one year was longer than most (*i.e.* seven out of nine had suspension lengths of one semester). When looking at the collected data from previous semesters, the task force came to find that the number of students on probation had increased (176 to 302 students) between the

years of 2012 and 2017; however, the number of students on suspension was fairly consistent across this time (118 to 100 students), and a majority (77 percent) of suspended students were not returning to the institution to persist or graduate once they had been removed due to their academic standing.

When looking at specific breakdowns within that data, it was clear that freshmen and juniors were more likely to be suspended than sophomores and seniors. It should also be noted that new students who fell to alert or probation status during their first semester were found to be at extremely high risk of leaving the institution within the next one to two semesters due to poor academic performance. Male students were 40 percent more likely than female students to be suspended (males make up 41 percent of the student population but 62 percent of suspensions). Students who identified as part of an ethnic or racial minoritized group were more likely to be suspended than white students, as minoritized students made up 8 percent of the student population but 18 percent of suspensions.

The TAPS committee came to find additional inequities within the policy, as there were significant differences in suspension rates based on proxy measures of financial security. Students whose estimated family contribution (EFC) was below \$5,000 were four times more likely to be suspended than those whose EFC was in the top four brackets. Pell-eligible students were suspended at a 14 percent higher rate than the overall student population, and students who had a hold on their account due to an unpaid university bill were three times more likely to be suspended. During the fall 2017 semester, the TAPS committee found 0 percent of students of color, 0 percent of transfer students, 13 percent of male students, 25 percent of Pell-eligible students, and 43 percent of first-generation students completed the semester in good standing following their suspension.

After discussing this outcomes analysis of the current suspension and readmission policy, as well as benchmark information from peer institutions, the TAPS committee decided to pilot a number of key changes in the upcoming semester. In collaboration with campus colleagues, TAPS committee members re-

viewed relevant literature in the field to identify criteria that would indicate students were prepared to return early from suspension, and they used this information to change the application and selection process for early readmission. The committee also determined that a mandatory intervention was critical to ensuring that readmitted students had the support and skill development necessary to improve academic performance. As a result, the new pilot policy and process for academic suspension and early readmission would include:

- A revised application for early readmission,¹ which included a rubric (*see* Table 2, on page 32) focusing on four specific criteria (locus of control, openness to new strategies, progress toward removing obstacles, and depth of reflection) to guide the committee's decision about whether or not to approve a student for early readmission, or
- If students chose not to apply for early readmission, or were not approved to return by the committee, they were asked to stop out for one semester (rather than one year) before returning to continue their coursework.

If students chose option number one and were readmitted early to the institution, they were required to enroll in a two-credit hour early readmission program course (UNIV 3159: Unlocking Motivation and Learning), focused on learning strategies with embedded, weekly one-to-one success coaching sessions on topics such as finances, planning, coping and stress management, exam review, and preparing for finals.

Assessment of the New Policy

In fall 2018, the new policy was implemented, with the first UNIV 3159: Unlocking Motivation and Learning course hosted in spring 2019, enrolling 25 students readmitted to the institution following academic suspension. This two-credit hour course was designed around the following student learning outcomes, and included one hour of weekly classroom time and one hour of one-to-one coaching:

¹ See <registrar.uni.edu/application-early-readmission-suspension>.

- Develop the mindset and behaviors of a self-regulated learner through use of goal-setting, metacognition, and reflection strategies.
- Identify and use appropriate strategies to boost motivation in an academic context.
- Synthesize self-reflection, metacognitive strategies, motivation concepts, and campus/community support into a plan for future success.

By the end of that semester, 68 percent of students were in good standing with 16 percent continuing on academic probation and 16 percent returning to academic suspension. This was a 30 percentage-point decrease in readmitted students falling back into academic suspension as compared to the previous semester. Data also indicated that 80 percent of students of color, 50 percent of transfer students, 40 percent of male students, 25 percent of Pell-eligible students, and 83 percent of first-generation students completed the semester in good standing following their suspension.

Following this group of students over the course of time, data came to show that by fall 2021, 31 percent of students had graduated from the institution; 26 percent were still continuing to persist at the institution in good academic standing; and the remaining 35 percent had unfortunately fallen to probation or suspension status. As the course has continued, there were 20 students readmitted between spring 2019 and fall 2019 with 45 percent graduating, 25 percent continuing on in good standing, and 35 percent returning to probation or suspension status.

In assessing the course and student outcomes of the new early readmission program, self-reported pre- and post-tests (Appendices C and D) were also conducted at the start and end of the semester-long course. These surveys asked about a student's course attendance, ability to take notes, office hour attendance with faculty, reviewing (or previewing) class notes and reading prior to class and prior to their exams, time spent studying, and their ability to study with specific goals in mind. Upon completion of the course, a comparison of the pre- and post-test results came to find that by the end of the sixteen-week course, students shared they were more

TABLE 1 ► Percent of Students on “Good Standing”

Cohort	Spring 2018	Spring 2019
Students of Color	0	80
Transfer Students	0	50
Pell Eligible Students	25	25
First-Generation Students	43	83
Male Students	13	40

Note: In Spring 2018, there were limited remediation practices following academic suspension, whereas in Spring 2019 new practices assisted students following their time on academic suspension.

often attending class on time, going over class notes as soon as possible after class, attending professors' office or tutoring hours, reviewing class notes or readings before class, reviewing their notes and textbooks after each class, spending time studying at least five days per week (outside of class), and studying with concentrated time and specific goals in mind than they were at the start of the semester.

The new policy implementation both improved retention and graduation rates for academically suspended students and helped provide students with additional academic skills that would help them excel in other courses at the institution and in future academic endeavors.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The data and findings outlined above led the Task Force on Academic Probation and Suspension (TAPS) to propose a plan that would better align with UNI's philosophy that the process of academic alert, probation, and suspension should support student success and completion, rather than serve as a punitive consequence. As a result, in fall 2018, a three-pronged action plan was implemented and included the following changes: 1) shorten the length of academic suspension from one year to one semester; 2) improve the quality and transparency of the early readmission process; and 3) design and implement a success pathway for the early readmitted students in the form of a required course with embedded one-to-one success coaching.

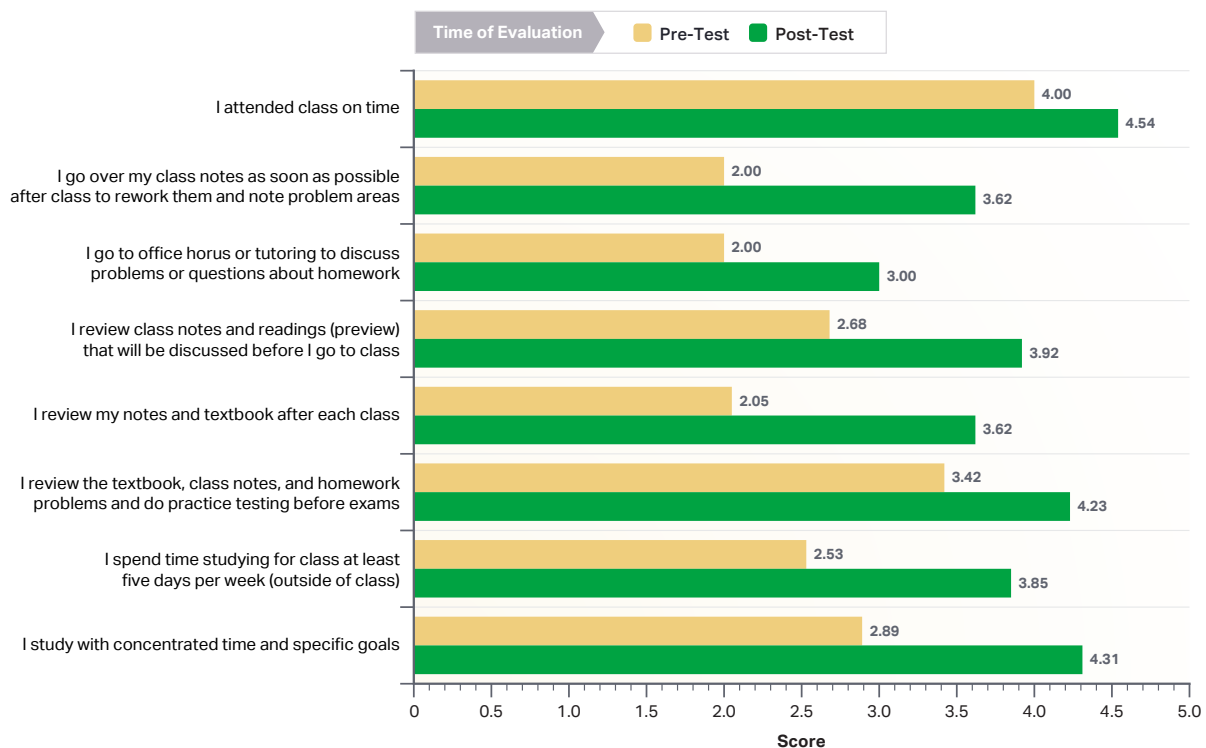


FIGURE 1 ► Survey Results for Students Readmitted After Academic Suspension, Spring 2020

At the start of the semester following their suspension, students were surveyed about their academic behaviors leading up to their suspension (pre-test). Subsequently, at the end of the semester, they took part in a second survey (post-test) to gauge how those behaviors had changed.

By aligning the general suspension policy with that of institutional peers, the university was immediately able to shorten the length of suspension and improve on the fact that under the previous policy 77 percent of those students suspended failed to return to the institution. By shortening the length of suspension, students could potentially remain more connected to the institution, stay more focused on readmission, and use the shortened suspension period to resolve any issues and barriers preventing a successful return.

While this part of the action plan first impacted those students suspended for the spring 2019 semester, the results of the policy change from one year to one semester have not yet been thoroughly analyzed, in part because the suspension policy was paused in the spring of 2020 due to COVID-19. Presently, students who opt to return to campus after sitting out one semester are not required to participate in any post-suspension intervention, though they are encouraged to take advantage

of an optional one-to-one success coaching program. However, given the success of this new early readmission option, the next step will be to compare the success rates of those students who participate in the early readmission program and those who opt to simply sit out one semester in order to determine if some type of mandatory re-admission intervention is necessary to better support all returning students post-suspension.

While the question remains as to whether all re-admitted students would benefit from a re-entry requirement, what has been ascertained is that students who apply and are selected to participate in the new early readmission program have significantly improved outcomes.

The success of this new program is associated with the fact that readmission policies, procedures, and expectations are more nuanced, intentional, and grounded in research on student success. Students still apply for early readmission and appear before the Committee on

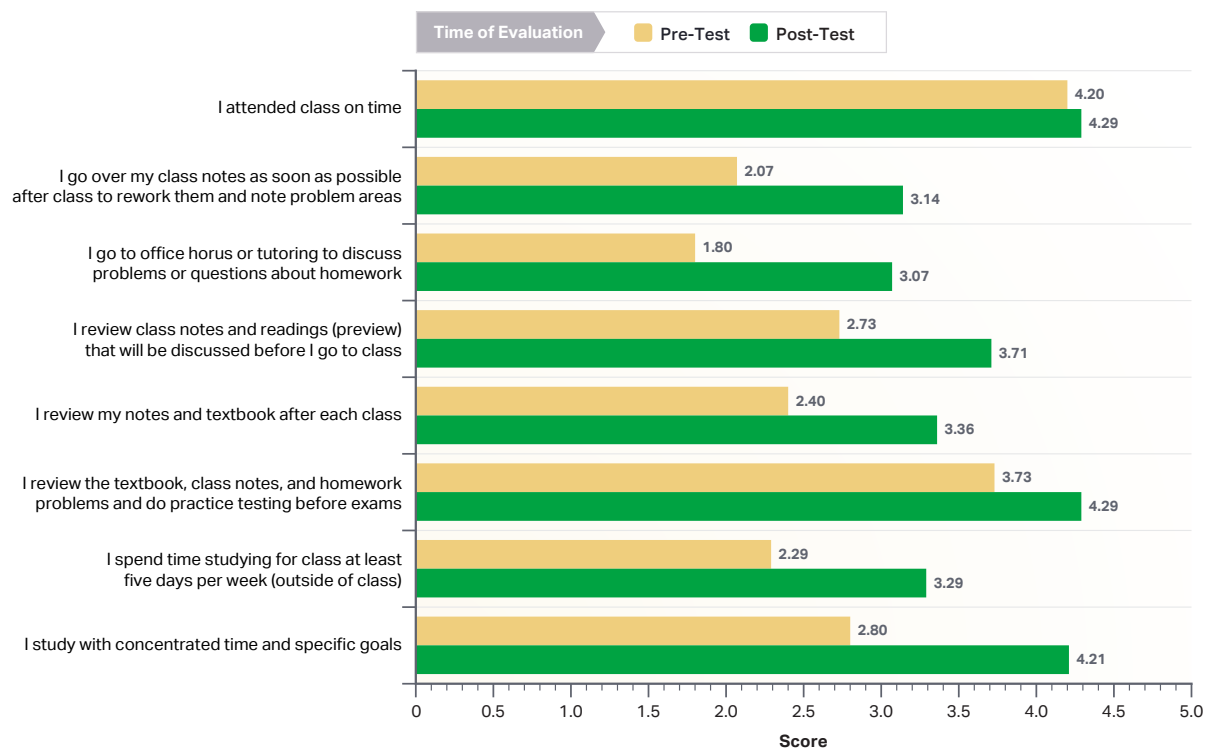


FIGURE 2 ► Survey Results for Students Readmitted After Academic Suspension, Spring 2021

At the start of the semester following their suspension, students were surveyed about their academic behaviors leading up to their suspension (pre-test). Subsequently, at the end of the semester, they took part in a second survey (post-test) to gauge how those behaviors had changed.

Admission, Readmission, and Retention (CARR) as in the past, but the new application form² and committee decision-making process now involves clear criteria grounded in research on student success (*see* Table 2, on page 32). This more intentional and nuanced process provides better guidance to faculty and staff members on the CARR committee as they determine which students are ready to return to the university and make meaningful improvements to their academic performance.

However, determining a student's readiness to return is not in itself a complete intervention. The new UNIV 3159: Unlocking Motivation and Learning Course required of students in the early readmission program, with a framework of mental contrasting and implementation intentions that guides students in moving toward their goals (Duckworth, Kirby, Gollwitzer, and Oettingen 2013), has created a space where students

continue to develop the learning strategies and academic behaviors critical to their success. The outcomes of this course add to previous research that points to the effectiveness of credit-bearing courses for students in poor academic standing (McGrath and Burd 2012).

Included within the course is a week-by-week structured and required success coaching curriculum that allows for individualized assistance with academic, financial, and personal tasks and resources aligned with each student's needs. In this model, graduate students supporting the course are assigned a small caseload of students, and use the motivational interviewing (MI) framework in weekly meetings throughout the semester to encourage behavior change (Miller and Rollnick 1995). The success coaching curriculum includes topics such as finances, planning and goal setting, coping, and stress management.

The UNIV 3159: Unlocking Motivation and Learning course is held to two credit hours, allowing students

² See <registrar.uni.edu/application-early-readmission-suspension>.

TABLE 2 ► Early Readmission Rubric

	Does Not Meet	Meets	Exceeds
Locus of Control	Primarily places blame for challenges and outcomes on external forces such as professors or advisors.	Accepts responsibility for decisions or inactions that contributed to academic status. Indicates that change in individual behavior will lead to better outcomes.	Accepts responsibility for factors that contributed to academic suspension. Indicates that change in individual behavior will lead to better outcomes. Has already taken steps to change behaviors.
Openness to New Strategies	Few indications that student plans to try new approaches or take new actions in the process of improving academic outcomes.	Expresses interest in learning and applying new strategies.	Enthusiastic about learning and applying new strategies. Has started researching new approaches and applying them in advance of the semester.
Progress Toward Resolving Obstacles	Minimal progress toward resolving serious barriers. Highly concerning issues that will require significant focus outside of academics.	Meaningful progress toward resolving serious barriers. Has started meeting with advisors, counselors, or other resource people. Clear indications that issues will no longer prevent student from making academic progress.	Significant progress toward resolving serious barriers. Obstacles have been resolved and support is fully in place to promote continued success.
Depth of Reflection	Appears that minimal time was given to the application questions. Short responses with little evidence that the student reflected on previous experiences, future goals, or behavior changes.	Well-developed answers to open ended questions that indicate meaningful consideration of previous experiences, future goals, and required behavior changes.	Well-developed answers to open ended questions that indicate meaningful consideration of previous experiences and future goals. Provides specific examples of intended behavior changes connected to reflection on previous challenges.

to add the course on top of their full-time (12 credit hour) course load and stay within the fourteen credit hour limit for students on academic probation, while also avoiding additional tuition costs, due to full-time tuition remaining the same for twelve credit hours and above. This approach was designed to address student financial and time management concerns.

Next Steps, Study Limitations and Areas for Further Research

The University has now offered UNIV 3159: Unlocking Motivation and Learning over a total of six semesters and plans to continue offering the course to a select group of students each semester. At some point, the university will need to decide whether or not the program should be expanded to include more students, and while it is tempting to move forward quickly with such

an expansion, the institution must do so with intentionality. What seems to be working with the current cohort of readmitted students is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all solution. If the institution opts to expand the program, different readmission criteria and perhaps even a different intervention will need to be considered.

Before making large scale changes to the program, it must be assessed over a longer period of time, without the interruption of a world-wide pandemic. This case study is limited by the short duration of the program's existence, the COVID-19 interruptions, and the rather small total number of students included in the data set. Continued assessment of the course, UNIV 3159: Unlocking Motivation and Learning, as well as the future retention, persistence, and graduation rates of the participation students will dictate the future of this program.

Looking forward, more data needs to be collected concerning those students who opt to sit out one semester as well. Further data collection and analysis will help the university better understand how to improve serving these students through ongoing engagement,

advising, and support. This type of support, perhaps combined with a required re-entry intervention, may be the next step in graduating more students who have at one time faced academic difficulty and been suspended.

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