

Retaining Students on Academic Probation: A Case Management Approach

by Joe Martinez

Student retention and success is an essential goal of institutional effectiveness for El Centro College and the District. Retaining students in higher risk categories, such as students on academic probation can be a challenge, but just as important to the mission and purpose of El Centro and community colleges in general. Vincent Tinto (1994) identifies three major sources of student departure: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. Students on academic probation are usually facing substantial academic struggles, lack well defined educational and career goals, and are less integrated into the college environment.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of case management for students reinstated from Suspension, Academic Dismissal and Indefinite Dismissal. The first semester that a student's *cumulative* GPA falls below 2.0 they are placed on Probation 1. They remain on probation until their *cumulative* GPA reaches 2.0 or higher. While on Probation 1, if a student's *semester* GPA falls below 2.0, or if they withdraw from all courses, then they are placed on Suspension. Students on Suspension must not be allowed to enroll in credit courses for the following semester. Once reinstated, after an appeal process, students are placed on Probation 2. While on Probation 2, if a student's *semester* GPA falls below 2.0 again, or if they withdraw from all courses, then they are placed on Academic Dismissal. Students on Academic Dismissal are not allowed to enroll in credit courses for a period of 12 months. Once reinstated, after an appeal process, students are placed on Probation 3. While on Probation 3, if a student's *semester* GPA falls below 2.0 again, or if they withdraw from all courses, then they are placed on Indefinite Dismissal. Students on Indefinite Dismissal are not allowed to enroll in credit courses for a period of 12 months, and can only be reinstated upon the recommendation of the chief student affairs officer.

El Centro students reinstated from Suspension, Academic Dismissal and Indefinite Dismissal are required to complete a Probation Contract and are limited to no more than seven credit hours. Prior to the case study in Fall 2007, the other requirement for the students was to enroll in a 1 credit hour Human Development course: HDEV 0100. The course was a traditional lecture class structure, which met for 1 hour and 15 minutes for 11 weeks. The content of the class was based on discussion of weekly journals and topics such as time management, study skills, and goal setting.

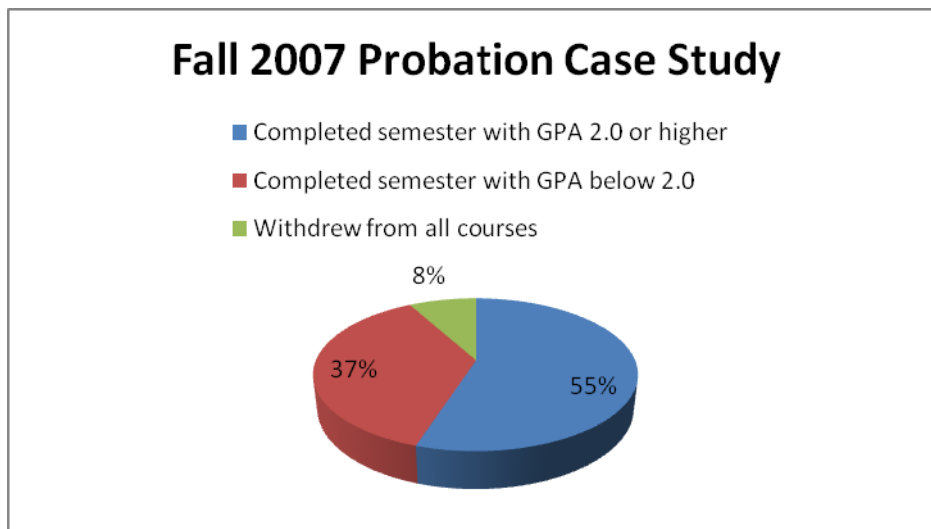
The rationale for trying a different approach with probation students was the negative response that students were expressing about being in a class with other "non-successful" students. The class seemed punitive and there was a lack of buy-in by the students. The instructors also expressed concern over the negative classroom atmosphere. It was my assumption that using a case management approach would eliminate the majority of student negativity towards the class, and thus increase

completion and retention of probation students by their interaction and relationship with an instructor who would serve both as a counselor and a mentor.

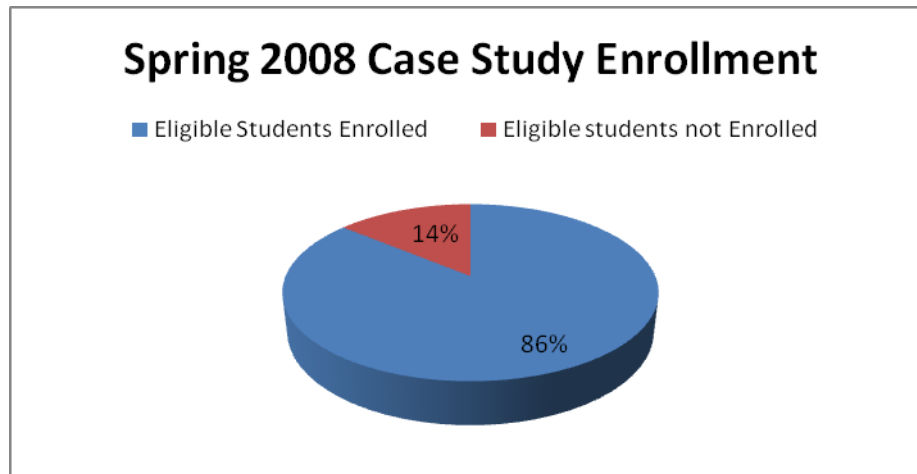
Students that were reinstated from Suspension, Academic Dismissal and/or Indefinite Dismissal for the Fall 2007 semester were required to register for HDEV 0100. The objectives of the course included: *to adopt positive attitudes that would enhance college success; to analyze personal qualities, skills, and behaviors to become more self-aware; and to feel empowered to make wise choices in school and in life.* The requirements of the course consisted of **Success Meetings**, where the student met with the instructor three times throughout the semester to discuss academic progress, difficulties, class assignments, and to work on the student’s individual goals. Students were required to complete an **Autobiography** for their first Success Meeting, a **Personality Assessment with Reflection Paper** for their second Success Meeting, and a **Career Assessment with Reflection Paper** for their third Success Meeting. Other assignments included weekly **Journals** reflecting on their adjustment to school, and attendance at **Student Success Workshops** and **Tutoring Sessions**. The three class assignments and the Success Meetings were an opportunity for the student to explore their educational and career goals, as well as to help foster a trusting relationship with their instructor in the hopes of integrating them further into the environment of El Centro College.

This case study consisted of all 38 students that were reinstated to El Centro College for the Fall 2007 semester from Suspension, Academic Dismissal and/or Indefinite Dismissal. Retention and student success was evaluated on three measures: 1) the number of students who completed the Fall 2007 semester with a term GPA of 2.0 or higher, 2) the number of those “successful” students who then enrolled in the Spring 2008 semester, and finally 3) the number of those “successful” students who completed the Spring 2008 semester with a term GPA of 2.0 or higher.

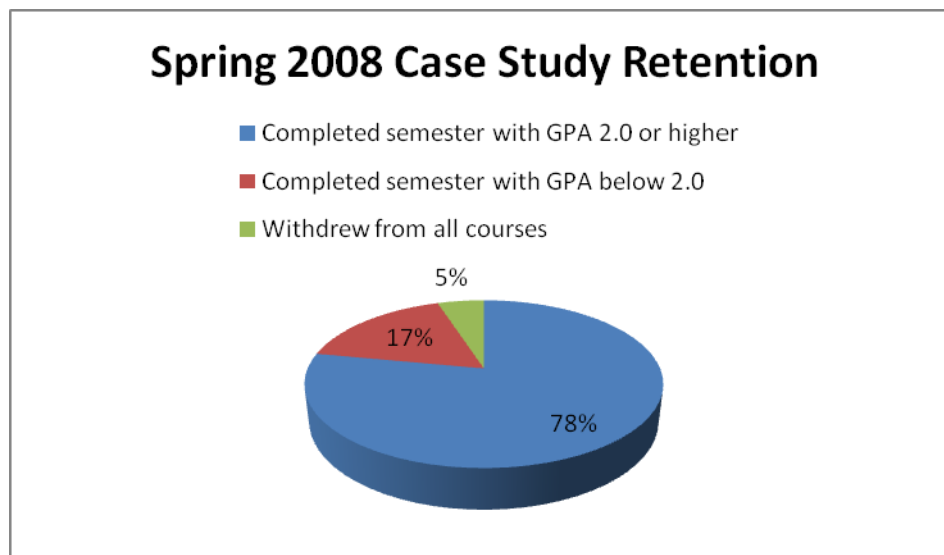
Twenty-one of the thirty-eight students (**55%**), completed the semester successfully with a 2.0 semester GPA or higher; fourteen of the thirty-eight students (**37%**) completed the semester with a semester GPA below 2.0; and three of the thirty-eight students (**8%**) withdrew from all Fall 2007 courses. So, **45%** of the students in the study failed to complete the semester successfully.



Eighteen of the twenty-one students (**86%**) who completed the Fall 2007 semester successfully enrolled for the Spring 2008 semester. While four students (**14%**) that were eligible to enroll for the Spring 2008 semester chose not to enroll.

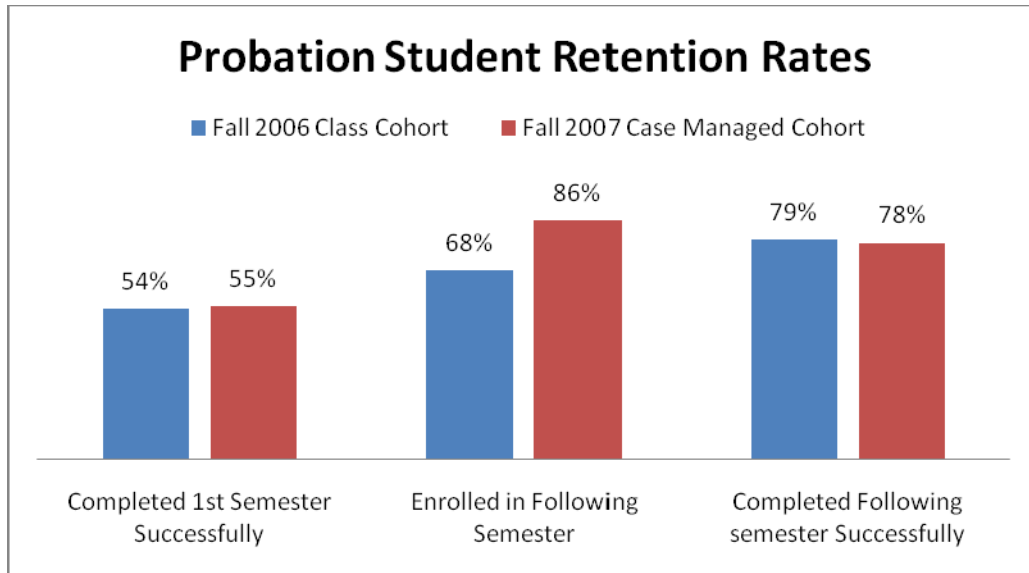


Fourteen of the eighteen students (**78%**) who enrolled in Spring 2008 completed the semester successfully with a 2.0 semester GPA or higher; three of the eighteen students (**17%**) who enrolled in Spring 2008 completed the semester unsuccessfully with a semester GPA below 2.0; and one student (**5%**) withdrew from all Spring 2008 courses.



We also looked at the retention rates of the Fall 2006 probation class cohort to compare them to our 2007 case managed cohort. **54%** of students reinstated for the Fall 2006 and enrolled in a traditional probation class completed the Fall 2006 semester with a 2.0 GPA or higher, compared to **55%** for our 2007 case managed cohort. However, only **68%** of the Fall 2006 cohort enrolled in the following Spring 2007, while the Fall to Spring retention rate was better for the case managed cohort at **86%**. Finally, the success rate was fairly equal for both groups for completion of the following Spring. **79%** of the probation class 2006 cohort completed the following Spring 2007 semester with a 2.0 GPA or higher,

in comparison to **78%** successful completion of the Spring 2008 semester for the case managed 2007 cohort.



Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that case managing as a retention strategy for probation students is just as effective as a probation lecture class. The major significant difference however, was the Fall to Spring retention rate. Case managing was 18% more successful at retaining students to enroll in the following semester than the class cohort. It's my belief that case managing provided students with familiarity, trust and a connection to an individual on campus via the instructor/counselor who not only supported and encouraged the students, but also helped them enroll for the following semester. The student to instructor relationship goes both ways, however. A year later, I still remember a lot of my students and many continue to come see me for advisement and support!

Tinto, V. (1994). Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition. (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.