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Albion College's Academic Success Program

Albion College is a private four-year liberal arts college located in south-central Michigan. The college has approximately 1500 students, 90% of whom live on campus. Albion College takes pride in challenging its students with a rigorous curriculum while offering students high levels of academic and personal support. Established in the fall semester of 2006, the Academic Success Program (ASP) has paralleled Albion College's emphasis on challenge and support and has helped retain the institution's highest risk students. Albion College has three levels of academic probation, Terminal Probation (TP) being the most severe. Prior to 2006, the college's support staff spent a significant amount of time and energy providing individual support to students who were on TP, but for the most part, the staff's efforts to help these students were unsuccessful. The Academic Success Program was developed in an attempt to provide an effective and efficient support service that directly addresses the issues related to academic underperformance and significantly improves the retention and achievement of TP students. In fall 2006, Albion College instituted the ASP, requiring TP students to participate in and complete the program. Seven to fifteen students participated in the ASP each semester.

Format of the ASP

The ASP incorporates a theory-based course for credit (the Academic Success Course), study sessions, and individual academic coaching to address the needs of students who are on TP. Historically, most retention based courses (i.e., study skills and learning to learn courses) have primarily focused on improving students' academic strategies. Although students who are experiencing severe academic difficulties often struggle with study skills, there are other profound "psychoacademic" issues affecting their performance. Two important constructs that have largely been ignored in other retention based programs are effort and ambivalence regarding change. Typical TP students are intelligent and have the ability to perform well in college, but often have poor work ethic and low frustration tolerance related to effort. Their study strategies were relatively effective in high school, but they are reluctant to adopt new strategies that are more appropriate for the increased demands of college. When encouraged to confront their academic problems, many underperforming students are ambivalent about receiving help, changing their academic behavior, and increasing effort. The ASP is designed to integrate interventions that focus on strategy, effort, and ambivalence in an attempt to address the specific issues that TP students experience.

Figure 1



The Academic Success Course

The Academic Success Course is a .5 unit (2 credit) course that meets in a classroom setting for an hour twice a week. Classroom meetings are discussion and activity-based and are aimed at helping students gain theoretical and pragmatic knowledge about the psychology underlying success and failure (e.g., the process of change, effort, ambivalence, motivation, self-regulation, how students get stuck and how they get unstuck, etc.).

The academic requirements of the Academic Success Course parallel the cognitive and behavioral demands of a typical college course. For example, students are required to complete outside readings, take quizzes and exams, write papers, etc. The course readings are demanding and most of the articles are drawn from academic journals. The course is intentionally difficult. Unlike a typical college course, when students in the Academic Success Course experience academic problems, they are challenged to address and explore these issues in the moment (i.e., experiential learning). For example, if a student performs poorly on an assignment, the student is encouraged to explore the specific processes that contributed to this outcome (e.g., strategy, ambivalence, effort, motivation, metacognition, self-handicapping, etc.) and options for improved performance in the future.

Study Sessions

Students in the ASP are required to attend three two-hour study sessions per week. The study session portion of the program is a simple and powerful tool that introduces students to a structured environment that promotes learning and achievement. ASP students' required attendance in study sessions helps students address issues related to ambivalence and increased effort (i.e., work through issues of low frustration tolerance, procrastination, negative feelings related to school work, etc.). Students are not allowed to use laptops or computers in study sessions, which eliminates a major source of distraction and encourages students to complete course readings, review lecture notes, create outlines for assigned papers, etc., tasks that ASP students have typically avoided in the past. Finally, study sessions provide structure that helps keep students focused and moving forward throughout the semester. This is particularly valuable in times of increased ambivalence and stress, such as the beginning of the semester and during examinations. Although initially study sessions can be a source of contention for some ASP students, by midterms the vast majority of students indicate that the sessions are extremely helpful.

Academic Coaching

The instructor of the ASP, an Academic Affairs staff member and a Licensed Clinical Psychologist who has extensive experience working with students who have academic difficulties, is not simply an instructor to the students, but also a mentor, advocate, academic coach, supplemental academic advisor, and "point person" for the ASP students during their TP semester. Although ASP students retain their original academic advisor, issues and concerns that faculty, staff, and administration have regarding an ASP student are addressed through the ASP instructor. The ASP instructor addresses problems and concerns directly with the student and refers him / her to the appropriate campus resources (e.g., Learning Support Center, Writing Center, Career Development, Counseling Services, etc.). Although TP students are often thriving socially and have close peer relationships, they typically have limited connection with faculty and staff and are reluctant to seek help from campus resources. The student / instructor relationship provides the opportunity for students to build a meaningful connection with a supportive campus figure and promotes connection with other faculty and staff.

A collaborative relationship between the ASP instructor and each student is a critical part of the program. To facilitate this relationship, the instructor frequently meets with each ASP student individually outside of class throughout the semester. The instructor assumes a Motivational

Interviewing stance with students, and although the instructor does not take the role of a therapist, his interpersonal stance and interactions with the students are often therapeutic in nature (i.e. supportive, empathetic, nonjudgmental, patient, non-defensive, genuine, transparent, consistent, responsive, curious, etc.). This stance builds trust and rapport and helps students move through the process of change. The instructor encourages academic improvement and challenges students to address issues directly; however students understand that it is their choice whether to move forward or not, which increases the students' sense of control and reduces resistance, further promoting positive change.

Results

The ASP has significantly improved the retention and academic achievement of Albion College's highest risk students. Assessment of the data for TP students indicates that ASP students were retained at significantly higher rates than non-ASP students (i.e., students who were on TP before the ASP's inception) for every time point assessed (i.e., one semester, one year, and two years). Specifically, the one-semester retention rate has increased from 38.2 percent for non-ASP students to 71.6 percent for ASP students (Figure 2); the one-year retention rate is up from 29.4 percent for non-ASP students to 57.1 percent for ASP students (Figure 3); and the two-year retention rate has increased from 23.5 percent for non-ASP students to 51.3 percent for ASP students (Figure 4).

Figure 2

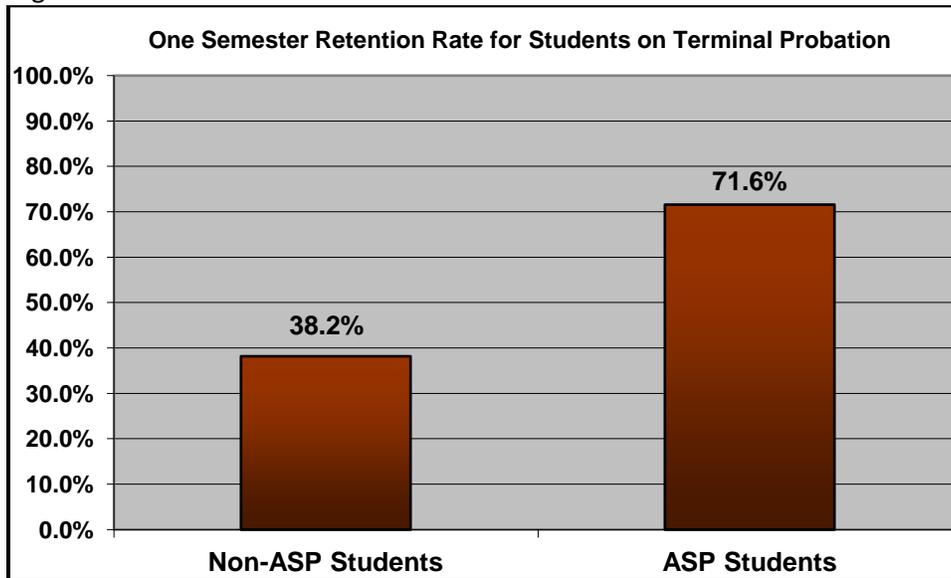


Figure 3

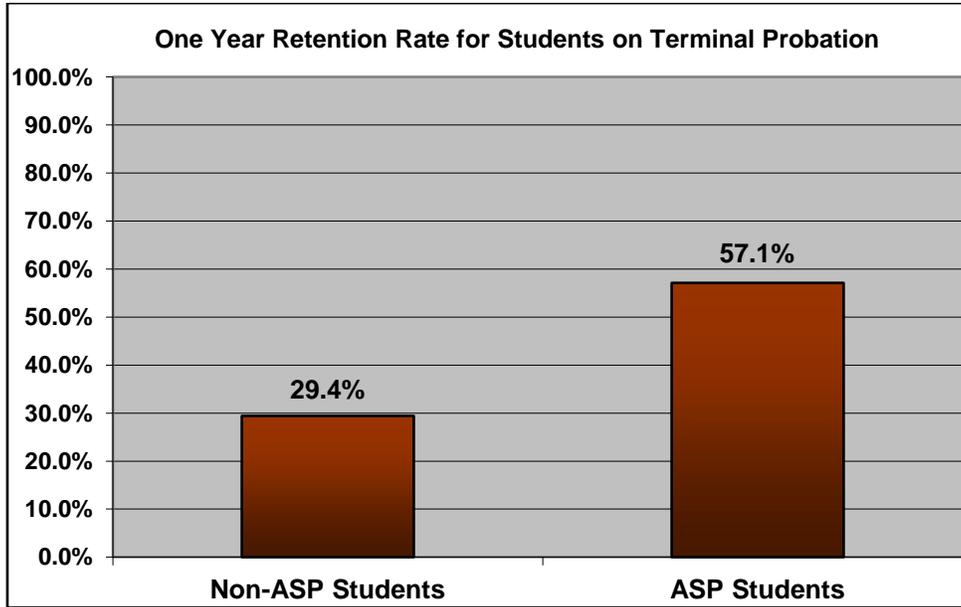
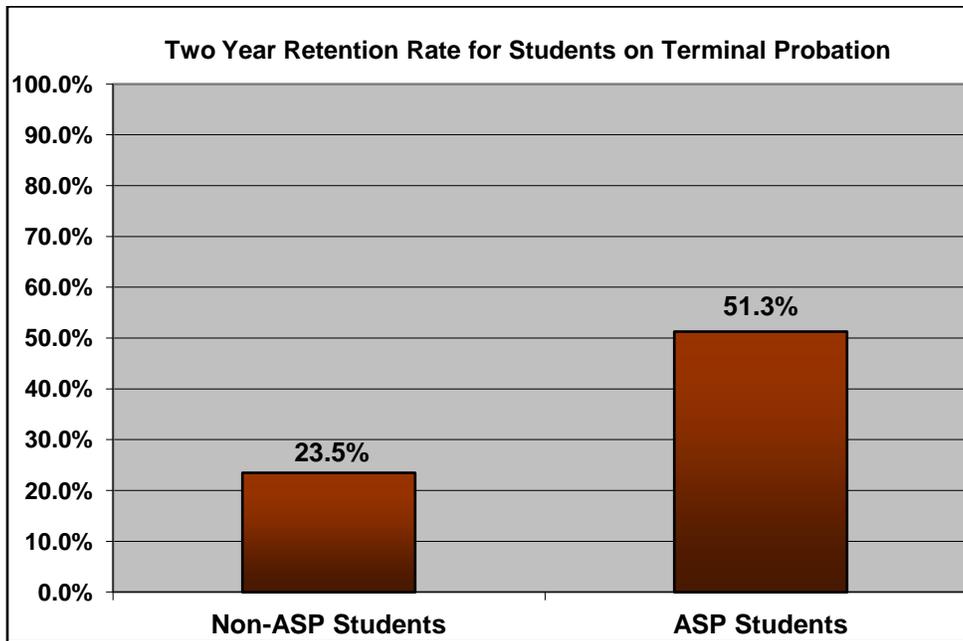
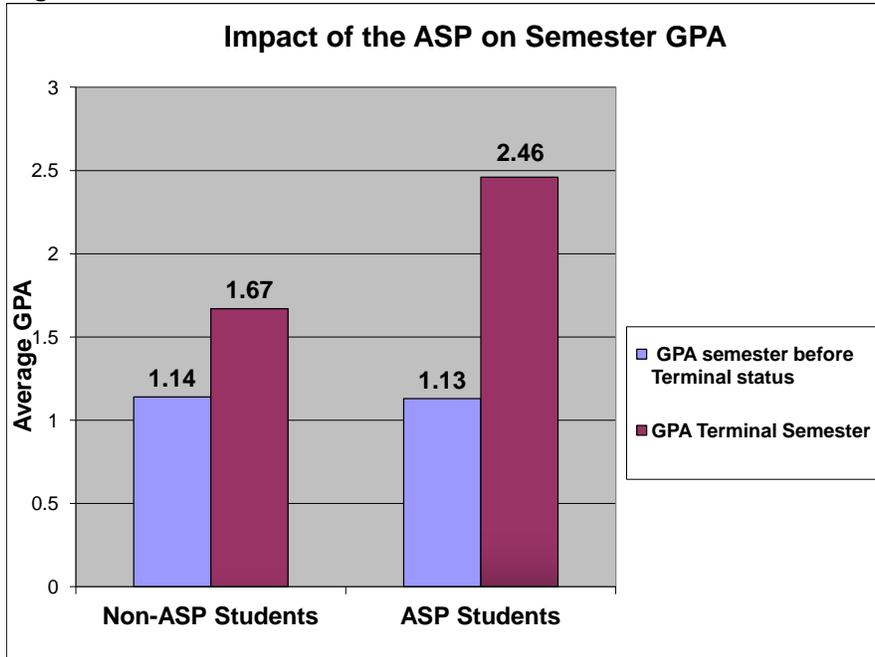


Figure 4



The data also indicates that the ASP has helped to significantly increase the academic achievement of TP students. ASP students entered their TP semester with an average semester GPA of 1.13 (i.e., the semester that resulted in their TP status), which increased to an average semester GPA of 2.46 for their TP semester (i.e., the semester that they were enrolled in the ASP). ASP students also significantly outperformed non-ASP students. During their TP semester, non-ASP students earned an average semester GPA of 1.67 and ASP students earned an average semester GPA of 2.46 (Figure 5).

Figure 5



Potential for Adaptation by Other Institutions

The results of the ASP have major implications for retention based programs in higher education. The ASP is a simple and inexpensive resource that has the potential to increase retention and academic achievement for any small or mid-sized college or university. The program's emphasis on strategy, ambivalence, and effort fits neatly with the focus of most colleges' academic support efforts. The ASP is an autonomous resource that networks with and refers to other campus resources when needed, allowing colleges to add the ASP as a supplement to already existing support services. Having the ASP instructor assume the role of "point person" for TP students centralizes support, promoting a collaborative relationship with students and ensuring that institutional resources are utilized in the most efficient and effective ways. Higher education institutions could easily adopt the ASP's model to help increase retention and student academic achievement.

Meta Data Tags

Retention
Improving Achievement