Helena College of Technology goal planning program for academic probationary college students
by Judy Louise Hay

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Education
Montana State University
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Abstract:
The Helena College of Technology of The University of Montana (HCT) is a small, two-year, technical institution in Helena, Montana. The problem for this study was that the leadership at the College did not know whether students on academic probation were helped to persist at a higher rate through the use of the Goal Planning Program (GPP) as an intervention during their probationary semester. The research questions were: Does the GPP have a positive effect on the grades and persistence to their next semester of the students who participate in it? Do the students who participate in the GPP improve their grades more and persist to graduation at a higher rate than the probationary students who do not participate in the Program? The GPP was developed by Dr. Henry Reiff at Western Maryland College. The present study is a replication of Dr. Reif's initial study, in which students' grades and persistence were enhanced significantly.

Two groups were examined: participants in the GPP and a comparison group (probationary students who did not participate). The researcher compared mean fall and spring GPAs and three-year graduation rates of participants and the comparison group. Because the results did not parallel Reiff's results, other relationships with GPP participation were investigated such as, whether student age was a factor in choosing to participate, and whether student age was related to graduation rate. No relationships were found in these additional investigations.

Study results suggest that students on academic probation who participate in the GPP are more likely to graduate than those who do not. Other trends were evident in the results that, taken together, indicate a generally positive influence that the GPP had on participants. Participants performed better than the comparison group in numbers and percents of students who increased their GPAs, avoided dismissal, and graduated.

The final recommendations from this study are to continue the GPP as part of an institutional retention plan, and institute many of the Program's elements early in students' enrollment at HCT.

HELENA COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY GOAL PLANNING PROGRAM FOR ACADEMIC PROBATIONARY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Judy Louise Hay

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Education

in

Education

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

July 2003

N378
H322

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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Signature Judy L. Hay

Date July 17, 2003

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ABSTRACT

The Helena College of Technology of The University of Montana (HCT) is a small, two-year, technical institution in Helena, Montana. The problem for this study was that the leadership at the College did not know whether students on academic probation were helped to persist at a higher rate through the use of the Goal Planning Program (GPP) as an intervention during their probationary semester. The research questions were: Does the GPP have a positive effect on the grades and persistence to their next semester of the students who participate in it? Do the students who participate in the GPP improve their grades more and persist to graduation at a higher rate than the probationary students who do not participate in the Program?

The GPP was developed by Dr. Henry Reiff at Western Maryland College. The present study is a replication of Dr. Reiff's initial study, in which students' grades and persistence were enhanced significantly.

Two groups were examined: participants in the GPP and a comparison group (probationary students who did not participate). The researcher compared mean fall and spring GPAs and three-year graduation rates of participants and the comparison group. Because the results did not parallel Reiff's results, other relationships with GPP participation were investigated such as, whether student age was a factor in choosing to participate, and whether student age was related to graduation rate. No relationships were found in these additional investigations.

Study results suggest that students on academic probation who participate in the GPP are more likely to graduate than those who do not. Other trends were evident in the results that, taken together, indicate a generally positive influence that the GPP had on participants. Participants performed better than the comparison group in numbers and percents of students who increased their GPAs, avoided dismissal, and graduated.

The final recommendations from this study are to continue the GPP as part of an institutional retention plan, and institute many of the Program's elements early in students' enrollment at HCT.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Academic preparation, student goals, and use of campus resources are just three of the components that can impact students' progress and success in college (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999). Colleges routinely attempt to assess students' readiness to attend college academically through entry requirements of ACT and SAT scores; placement exams for math, English, and reading; written essays; and personal interviews. In the end, however, there is no magic formula that accurately predicts student success in college., even with high marks on all of the above. Students leave college at rates that are quite troublesome. For fall 1997 entering freshmen, the first-year attrition rate for American four-year public institutions was 28.1%, and for two-year public institutions, it was 47.5% (1999 ACT Survey). The rates include students who transferred to other institutions as well as students who dropped from school altogether. The national trend has gone down only slightly since 1992 when those percentages were 28.3% and 47.9%, respectively (Tinto, 1993, p. 14).

It is not realistic for an institution to have an attrition rate of zero, because, as James I. Fisher writes in *Reducing the Dropout Rate*, "There are significant numbers of students for whom college is not a realistic possibility, whom all the remediation in the world will not help, but who are being encouraged to enroll" (1978, p. 65). However, an institution should not be satisfied with an attrition rate as high as those presented above. Rather, institutions should be engaged in identifying and analyzing their own individual problem areas, proposing solutions, and assessing the effectiveness of those solutions,

once instituted. Effective student retention programs do not promise that all admitted students can be retained, but do require an ongoing "commitment of the institution, of its faculty and staff, to the education of its students" (Tinto, 1993, p. 212).

Background Information

Helena College of Technology (HCT), a small, public, technical college of approximately 800 students, located in Helena, Montana has seen a steady climb in enrollment from a 1992 level of 433.33 full-time equivalent students (FTE) to 710.87 FTE in the fall of 2000 (HCT Fifteenth Day Enrollment Reports, 1992, 2000). Commitment to students on a personal level is evident at HCT, as recorded in a 1999 Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory. However, as with many two-year institutions, HCT does not have a record of identifying specific student retention issues or of ongoing efforts to study and address them. The 1999 Noel-Levitz inventory was the first of these efforts.

To begin to identify strengths and weaknesses in its work with students, HCT staff surveyed students with the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI). This first survey revealed high satisfaction with academic support systems; but also showed students somewhat dissatisfied with academic advising, among some other non-academic related items. Though the survey indicated some general areas HCT staff could investigate further in order to understand what, specifically, students were satisfied or dissatisfied with, no follow-up was done. The students originally surveyed in the SSI were no longer at HCT to engage in focus groups or other activities that would clarify points of

satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the SSI when this study was done. Plans were made by HCT leadership to survey students again with the SSI in two or three years.

After the first SSI was administered, an effort was initiated to improve HCT's record of probationary students being removed from academic probation and continuing in their studies. The Montana University System's, and HCT's, academic policy states that students whose grade point averages fall below 2.00 on a 4.00 scale will be placed on academic probation for one semester. A student is suspended from HCT if his/her grade point average remains below 2.00 for two consecutive semesters (2000-2001 HCT catalog). HCT staff had never tracked the success of its probationary students in moving off probation and back into good standing before, but knew that between 40 and 62 students were listed as probationary for the spring semesters since 1998 (Spring 1998 – 2001 HCT Fifteenth Day Enrollment Reports). The HCT Assistant Dean for Student Services, the Learning Center Director, and the Academic Counselor all agreed that the academic probationary population of students was large enough to merit some study and intervention.

Prior to this time, Henry Reiff developed a program for students on academic probation that grew from his and others' work with college students with learning disabilities (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Reiff, 1997). Their theory was that strategies that help students with learning disabilities succeed in college would help academically at-risk students in general. Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg (1997) developed the Goal Planning Program (GPP) and used it with students at Western Maryland College. It is the model adopted for use at HCT in the fall of 2000 to help students on academic probation successfully move off academic probation and continue their

educations. This study is an attempt to measure the success of the GPP, as instituted at HCT, in accomplishing its goals with students who participated in it.

Problem, Purpose, and Research Question

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was that the leadership at the Helena College of Technology did not know whether students on academic probation and participating in the Goal Planning Program (GPP) were helped to persist at a higher rate than those who did not participate. The Goal Planning Program was first piloted at HCT in the fall of 2000. The leadership was interested in early evaluation of the value of the program to the college and its students. Understanding whether the program improved HCT's practice with students on probation would help leaders at HCT decide whether to continue, alter, or discontinue the program. Further, other similar colleges in Montana may be interested in the outcomes as they consider options for addressing retention of students in academic trouble on their campuses.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate whether an adaptation of Henry Reiff's Goal Planning Program (GPP), which had demonstrated success at Western Maryland College and Mount Saint Mary's College, improved HCT students' grade point averages during their academic probationary semester.

Statement of the Research Questions

The questions this researcher answered in this study were:

1. Did the Goal Planning Program, as practiced at the Helena College of Technology, have a positive effect on the grades and persistence to their next semester of the students who participated in it?

2. Did the students who participated in the GPP improve their grades more and persist to graduation at a higher rate than the students on academic probation who did not participate in the program?

Introduction to the Study

Students on academic probation are at a crossroads in their education. After at least one semester of poor academic performance, they are in a position to attempt to improve their performance, or continue to do poorly and be suspended at the end of the semester. A myriad of factors make up the picture such as whether they intend to complete a degree; whether they feel committed to the degree they have chosen and the institution; what outside factors are at play in their lives with family and work; and whether they have the requisite academic skills to do the level of work the program demands of them. Depending on these and other factors, students will be successful and persist, or they will depart the institution altogether at the end of the semester.

It is in the best interest of students and colleges that students be offered help in navigating that probationary semester so that those students who desire to improve their grades and continue to completion of their degrees are enabled to do so. Since the Helena College of Technology instituted the Goal Planning Program as one way to both help students on academic probation and understand the factors that contribute to academic success or failure of these students, understanding its effectiveness is the

logical next step for this institution. Further, this researcher hopes to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding factors that hinder or aid student success in college through this study.

Importance of the Study

Retention of students in college has economic implications for both students and colleges. Men ages twenty-five and older with one to three years of college had a median annual income of $36,393 in 1998, college graduates with an associate degree made $40,274, and college graduates with a baccalaureate level degree of the same age group reported a median annual income of $51,405 (Digest of Education Statistics, 1999, Table 386). Institutions that are tuition-driven are impacted immediately when enrollments or completion rates decline. They lose new tuition when students do not choose to attend for the first time, and also when students drop out of school before completion of their degrees.

Individual colleges and universities must strive to understand the reasons students choose to stay or depart before completing degrees. When students are qualified and choose to attend a certain college, it is incumbent upon that institution to provide those students "with sufficient opportunities and resources to complete their courses of study should they so wish" (Tinto, 1993, p. 205). This study can help HCT better understand the difficulties students on academic probation face in persisting in their studies. The study may also contribute to HCT's understanding of what services and resources might help future students. The study will have limited generalizability to other colleges, but

may be helpful to other small colleges with similar academic probation policies and problems.

Design of the Study

Immediately before the start of spring semester 2001 at Helena College of Technology, students whose grade point averages were below 2.00 on a 4.00 scale at the end of fall semester 2000 received a letter from the Assistant Dean for Student Services. This letter detailed the academic probation policy at HCT and informed the student that he/she was on academic probation and under threat of suspension if the student's grades continue to be below the 2.00 level by the end of spring 2001 (Appendix A). This letter also recommended to the students that they see one of two academic advisors to participate in the Goal Planning Program for assistance in getting off of academic probation.

This researcher examined the grades of the students who chose to participate in the GPP and compared them to the students who were on academic probation but chose not to participate in the GPP. The grades from the semester before academic probation and grades from spring 2001 for both groups of students were compared to see if there was a positive difference in grades for students who worked with the advisors on the Goal Planning Program. This comparison follows the system of assessment the developer of the GPP, Henry Reiff, used to assess the GPP at Western Maryland College (1997).

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used in this study:

Academic Probation. A student taking six or more credits whose semester grade point average falls below a 2.00 on a 4.00 scale will be placed on academic probation for the following semester (HCT catalog, 2000-2001).

Academic Suspension. Students at HCT are suspended from if their semester grade point averages fall below 2.00 on a 4.00 scale for two consecutive semesters. Suspended students must sit out one semester before applying for readmission to HCT. Academic suspension cannot be appealed at HCT (HCT catalog, 2000-2001).

Program. At HCT, the term program refers to the student's major area of study. This is similar to what is typically called a major at a university, but the programs at HCT are designed to be completed in four to five semesters of full-time college enrollment. At the time of this study, HCT offered twelve different programs of study including three options for Associate of Science degrees, ten options for Associate of Applied Science degrees, and seven options for certificates (HCT catalog, 2000-2001).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The researcher carried out the study with the following assumptions, limitations, and delimitations:

Assumptions

1. All students on academic probation for spring semester 2001 received a letter informing them of the Goal Planning Program at HCT and strongly recommending that they participate and take advantage of the program.

2. The Goal Planning Program components were followed consistently by both academic advisors who worked with students in the program.

Limitations

1. The researcher's involvement in the Goal Planning Program. It is to be noted that the researcher in this study was one of the two advisors students in the study could meet with to participate in the program. She met with 20 of the 34 students who participated in the Goal Planning Program as they worked through the semester. Because of concern about objectivity and consistency, the two advisors met regularly to ensure as much as is possible that they were conducting the elements of the program in the same way. Comparisons of notes from student meetings and products of student record keeping were consistent to the satisfaction of the two advisors and the Assistant Dean for Student Services, who acted as an objective third party.

2. The voluntary nature of student participation in the GPP.

3. The small number of students who participated in this study makes it difficult to generalize to other colleges.

4. Differences in the demographics of the study groups from Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) studies. While Reiff and Gibbon both studied groups at four-year liberal arts colleges, with predominantly traditional aged college students, this study's population consisted of a population with an average age of 27.6 years and a standard deviation of 9.9 years, enrolled at a two-year technical college.

5. Because of a changeover from an old student data management system at HCT, data before spring of 2001 (the first semester on the new system) was difficult to

compare due to different data collection and management between the two systems. The old data exist only on paper now, and may have been collected using different criteria from the present system.

Delimitations

1. The choice of semester to study. Though the Goal Planning Program was piloted in the fall of 2000, this study focused on the spring semester 2001 students on academic probation. This was done in order to have a larger pool of students to study. The number of students on academic probation is typically larger in the spring semesters, as compared to fall semesters (HCT Academic Probation Reports, 1998-2001). Students who do poorly academically in a fall semester would typically be placed on academic probation for the spring semester as a second chance to improve their grades.

2. The academic advisors involved in the study chose to leave the choice of advisor to the students on academic probation. Since the program was to be largely voluntary, the advisors hoped it would increase the numbers of students participating if they got to choose their own advisor. It is not known if this helped or not.

Chapter Summary

The problem, purpose, and research question of this study were presented in this chapter. Some background information, the importance, and the design of the study were discussed to establish a basis for understanding the context of the study and its connection with retention efforts on the HCT campus. The current and historical literature related to the retention issues in this study will be reviewed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter is a review of the literature regarding student retention. Of primary interest was the literature dealing with the two-year college environment and specific programs for retaining students. Other topics included retention, academic probation programs, non-residential campus retention, retention programs for students on academic probation, and effective study strategies.

This study is an attempt to understand the persistence of students on academic probation at the Helena College of Technology. The problem addressed in this study is that the institution's leadership does not know whether students have been helped to persist at a higher rate through the use of the Goal Planning Program as an intervention with these students. This literature review is an examination of the current state of the literature on the subject of student persistence in two-year colleges with the goal of applying that understanding to the Helena College of Technology's problem.

Synthesis of the Literature

Criteria for Selection of the Literature

The literature search for this study was focused on retention of students in two-year, nonresidential college environments. Of specific interest was the issue of retention of students on academic probation. This narrow focus yielded few applicable sources.

Because most studies done in two-year institutions typically used a very limited sample of students from a single institution and obtained relatively low response rates, the search was widened to include the more general themes of retention and attrition. Effective study strategies as a theme was included when it became clear that programs for students on academic probation generally had a study strategies focus.

Though some literature dating back to the 1970s was cited, it was generally in corroboration of more recent literature. This review includes mainly literature from the 1990s and later, with a few exceptions for some of Vincent Tinto's early work and several mid-1980s studies that helped lay some groundwork for later research.

Retention and Attrition Literature

Much of the literature on retention and attrition had themes similar to Tinto's (1975) social interaction theory, which centered on student development and leaving college. In his *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1993), Tinto discussed the many student and institutional reasons why students leave college. Astin (1975, 1984, 1985), Ramist (1981), Tinto (1975, 1985, 1986), Noel (1985), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), Cross (1981), and Chickering (1993) are other primary sources informing this study and laying the foundation for understanding student retention in general.

In the search for two-year college retention studies, some were found, but few were very comprehensive or could be applied to other institutions because they addressed very specific problems at individual colleges. National quantitative information about two-year colleges and students is available from sources such as Educational Testing

Service, American College Testing Program, and the United States Department of Education. However, because similar retention information was not available for the Helena College of Technology at the time of this study, the specific usefulness of the national data to the current understanding of HCT's situation overall is limited.

The literature on student persistence in college over the past twenty years has been remarkably consistent in regard to the findings. Though this researcher concentrated on literature of the past ten to fifteen years, older literature was also consulted for historical and foundational purposes. Study after study confirms Tinto's view that persistence models are specific to individual institutions and to the time period being examined. "The key to successful student retention lies with the institution, its faculty and staff, not in any one formula or recipe." (Tinto, 1993, p. 4) Tinto's model of student integration forms the central theme for much of the current student persistence research (Baron, 1997; Gillespie & Noble, 1992; Noel et. al., 1985; Sydow & Sandel, 1998; Yaworski et. al., 2000). Tinto (1997) emphasized integration and commitment as key elements in understanding student departure. Students' background characteristics, their initial commitment to the goal of college completion, and their initial commitment to the institution they attend all influence students' intellectual development and academic performance, as well as their peer group and faculty interactions; thereby determining their integration into the campus community. Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg (1997) found these commitments to be important factors as well. In their study, students who had clear goals for college attendance were more successful than those who were unsure of their educational goals. Students who knew of and used institutional resources were more successful than students who did not. Students who had formed significant

relationships with at least one faculty member were more likely to persist than those who did not.

Earlier literature from the 1970's and 1980's was not particularly contradicted by more recent literature, so was used in this review as foundational to the topic of retention. Some more recent literature, especially Braxton (2000), however, is beginning to refine and question long held assumptions in the retention literature. In *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (2000), edited by John M. Braxton, scholars look at why, after all that is known about student departure, still nearly half of the students who enter two-year schools and more than a quarter of those who enter four-year schools depart at the end of their first year (p. 1). Braxton himself recommends further refining of Tinto's integration theory, while others he mentions, specifically Tierney (1992, 1998) and Attinasi (1989), advocate development of completely new theories (Braxton, 2000, p. 258). These newer directions in the research on retention did not relate to this investigation into academic probationary students, so will not be discussed further here.

Academic Probation Related Literature

To focus specifically on the context of the problem being addressed in this study, this researcher looked for literature dealing specifically with students who drop out or are suspended from college for academic reasons. Most of the studies found on this theme centered on the effectiveness of particular intervention programs at individual colleges. The Goal Planning Program, developed by Henry Reiff at Western Maryland College (1997), and loosely replicated at Mount Saint Mary's College in Maryland by Thomas C. Gibbon (2000), was the result of Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg's earlier work that looked at

what set successful students with learning disabilities apart from the students with learning disabilities who failed a semester of college (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1992, 1997). Weinsheimer's work pointed out similar characteristics of students in academic trouble, but did not specifically address students with learning disabilities (1998). Both Reiff and Weinsheimer found that the strategies used by successful students helped struggling students significantly. The key was that most students with learning disabilities, and lower performing students in general, needed to be taught many of the strategies.

Baker, Borland, Howard, and Johnson (2001) looked at the degree completion rates of students who had been suspended for poor academic performance, and recommend not merely academic suspension, but also academic intervention aimed at improving the students' preparation for college coursework upon their return from suspension. Baker, Borland, Howard, and Johnson recommended strengthening counseling, remedial, and developmental programs as possible elements that could improve the completion rates of students who had been suspended from the university. The literature regarding academic probationary students seems to point in the direction of specific, intentional intervention with students to target their individual deficits or barriers to progress.

Batzer (1997) and Oklahoma State Regents (1993) looked at the effects of remedial courses on probationary and other academically at-risk students. Though these studies examined different courses, in general both found that remedial courses helped retain students who may not have otherwise been successful in the beginning. Oklahoma

State Regents, in particular, encouraged mandatory placement into remedial courses for entering students with low placement scores.

Two-Year College Retention Literature

In the two-year college setting the issue of retention of students takes on a slightly different connotation than in four-year college settings because of the niche in American society that the two-year colleges fill of providing easy access to education for anyone desiring it. Studying student attrition at a two-year college becomes difficult because these institutions regard accessibility among their greatest virtues. "It is difficult for an institution built on the theme of easy access to limit easy exit." (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 66) This statement can certainly be applied to the Helena College of Technology's situation, and underscores the need to take a college's mission, as well as other characteristics, into account when examining student attrition at a specific school. ACT reports degree completion, for example, according to the selectivity (from open to highly selective) of a school's admissions policies, public and private funding structures, two-year and four-year colleges, and more. Tinto takes these factors and adds campus characteristics such as residential or commuter to the list of institutional characteristics that can affect student retention (Tinto, 1993). Further focusing on what might be happening on two-year college campuses, the 2002 National Center for Educational Statistics study, *Nontraditional Undergraduates*, by Susan Choy (2002), it was found that "nontraditional students seeking an associate's degree were less likely than their nontraditional peers to earn the degree," and "among nontraditional students, those seeking an associate's degree were more likely than those seeking a bachelor's degree to

leave without a degree." It would appear that students entering two-year colleges may be less committed to the goal of earning a degree than their four-year counterparts.

Other common characteristics of two-year colleges that complicate the retention picture are that they have a much higher percentage of nontraditional aged students and part-time students than the four-year colleges (Tinto, 1993, p. 9-11). Horn (1996) and Horn and Premo (1995) cite seven characteristics associated with nontraditional status that generally are related negatively to persistence: "financial independence, part-time attendance, delayed enrollment, full-time work, dependents, single parenthood, and lack of high school diploma." It could be expected, then, that two-year colleges with large populations of nontraditional aged students would have lower degree completion rates than either four-year colleges or two-year colleges with mostly traditional aged students.

Along with Tinto's interactional theory, Pascarella and Terenzini, in *How College Affects Students* (1991, pp. 640-644) examine the record of two-year colleges over a span of twenty years of research. They are quite harsh in their criticisms of how two-year colleges affect students' persistence to a baccalaureate degree, but they do point out that these colleges provide access to higher education for individuals who are first-generation college students at a much higher rate than four-year institutions do. Students who enter a baccalaureate degree program through a two-year college, Pascarella and Terenzini say, are at very high risk for dropping out. The authors advocate for more intensive remedial programs in reading, writing, math, and general learning skills, and more effective academic and personal support programs for transfer candidates at two-year colleges.

Two-year commuter colleges, have unique retention challenges because of reduced opportunities for students to form relationships on campus. "Nowhere then is the

importance of involvement more apparent than in the classrooms of the college" (Tinto, 1993; p. 92). Tinto advocates for cooperative and collaborative learning opportunities in classrooms so that students will form relationships with one another. He also says that there is "no substitute for periodic personal contact between students and faculty." (p. 194.) For nonresidential students, a personal demonstration of commitment of the institution to its students is necessary in order for students to form commitments to the institution. With students who traditionally are only on campus for the courses they are registered for, a college has little chance outside the classroom to create connections such as Tinto describes. Retention efforts must be concentrated on the academic interface the college has with students, cultivating an environment in which faculty and staff are intentional about their educational and personal commitments to students.

Tinto describes his "principles of effective implementation" of retention efforts:

1. "Institutions should provide resources for program development and incentives for program participation that reach out to faculty and staff alike.

2. Institutions should commit themselves to a long-term process of program development.

3. Institutions should place ownership for institutional change in the hands of those across the campus who have to implement that change.

4. Institutional actions should be coordinated in a collaborative fashion to insure a systematic, campus-wide approach to student retention.

5. Institutions should act to insure that faculty and staff possess the skills needed to assist and educate their students.

6. Institutions should frontload their efforts on behalf of student retention.

7. Institutions and programs should continually assess their actions with an eye toward improvement." (Tinto, 1993, pp. 149-153)

While all elements of implementation are necessary for change to take place and be maintained, Cohen and Brawer (2003, p. 44) and Cross (1981, p. 7) underscore the sixth element, *Institutions should frontload their efforts on behalf of student retention* (emphasis added) especially in the two-year college setting. Cohen and Brawer cite the fact that, generally, the majority of community college students come from the lower half of their high school classes academically and socioeconomically. Because of this, they believe that two-year colleges should ensure that the academic and social supports students need are available from the first day. First year programs, counseling and advising, and early warning systems are examples of intentional college supports that Upcraft and Gardner (1989) and Tinto (1993) cite as effective, echoing Pascarella and Terenzini's recommendations above. Put another way, intervention with individual students should be both "developmental and intrusive" to be effective with students at risk for dropping out (Noel, Levitz, Saluri and Associates, 1985, p. 449).

Another significant trend in the two-year institution student profile is the fact that the percentage of students who attend two-year colleges only part-time has risen from 47% in 1970 to 64% in 1997 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001b). Many factors are at play in making that happen, including the decline in the number of eighteen year-olds, an increase in the number of women attending college, and an increase in the number of students combining work and study (Cohen and Brawer, 2003, p. 41). The authors discuss the difficulty two-year colleges face in understanding retention on their campuses when so many students may take breaks from study to spend more time on

work and parenting. The term "stopping out" is used in the literature often to describe the student who takes a break for a semester or more, and returns to the institution eventually to finish his or her degree. This differs from what is commonly known as "dropping out," which often has the connotation of student academic failure attached to it. This point became important in understanding the persistence of students who were on academic probation at HCT, since some who are placed on academic probation are returning after a "stop out" of a semester or more, and may not require as many academic interventions as do students who are on probation due to low earned grades. This is another aspect of the necessity of individualizing approaches to retention.

Evaluation of the Literature

Student retention has been an issue of interest on most American college campuses over the past twenty years and more, if judged only by the shear volume of literature generated over that time on the subject (Astin, 1975, 1984, 1985, Cohen and Brawer, 2003, Braxton, 2000, Cross, 1981, Noel, 1978, 1985, Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, Ramist, 1981, Tinto, 1975, 1985, 1986, 1993). Since education of students is probably a central theme in all college mission statements, it stands to reason that retention of those students would be a concern of all units of most colleges.

Review of Methodologies Used to Study Student Retention

Making the case for putting institutional effort into retaining students in college currently is not difficult to do. Tinto makes this case in terms of institutional economics by urging schools to look at the costs associated with recruiting new students, adding to

that the losses of tuition, fees, and state support (in public institutions) when a student leaves. Individuals also suffer costs associated with their own dropping out, including financial setbacks, personal disappointment, and lowered career and life goals. Tinto goes further to make the case for retention efforts in terms of declining birthrates since the baby boom years and the fact that our society is an aging one (Tinto, 1993, pp. 7-15). There are simply fewer college-age students than there were in the 1970s. With a shrinking pool of traditional aged students for colleges to recruit, it makes logical sense to put efforts into keeping the students who are already enrolled. The next step, of deciding what should be done to keep students, is less clear, but the literature has much to offer in terms of how to approach retention of college students in general, and what data will help in assessing progress.

In 1981 Leonard Ramist looked at graduation rates as a measure of student persistence (1981, pp. 1-3). He went on to examine student demographic, academic, motivational, personal factors, college programs, policies, and services and their influence on student leaving patterns. His study pointed colleges to some specific actions that could assist in retaining students, such as financial aid, quality orientation programs, quality faculty-student interaction, quality academic programs, advising, and a variety of student services. He advocated for similar attention to all of these issues at the two-year college level as well, acknowledging the higher attrition rates of these largely commuter campus environments (pp. 4-30). Astin (1975), Tinto (1975, 1993), and Bean (1980, 1982, 1990) concur, and it is along these lines that Tinto's theory of student retention addresses the various interactions students and institutions have with each other that can result in a student's commitment to the institution and completion of a degree, or leaving.

Common measures of retention in these studies include semester-to-semester persistence and fall-to-fall persistence, as well as graduation rates.

Studies that dealt with students on academic probation, as stated earlier, were few. The work mainly used as the model for Helena College of Technology's academic probationary program was Henry Reiff's Goal Planning Program (GPP). Reiff's approach to studying the impact of the program on students at Western Maryland College included qualitative information in the form of student interview notes, and the more quantitative elements of Grade Point Averages (GPAs). Reiff looked at mean GPAs for students the semester before they were put on academic probation and the semester they participated in the GPP. Reiff used GPA, postulating that an overall increase in GPA concurrent with the use of the GPP would provide a degree of empirical support for the program (1997).

This comparative method provided Reiff with internal validity for his study. When Gibbon (2000) used Reiff's GPP with students, replicating it as closely as he could at Mount Saint Mary's College, some external validity was also established. Since GPA is central to college policies for academic standing overall, it was the most commonly used measure in evaluating success of academic probation programs (Reiff, 1997; Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1992, 1997; Gibbon, 2000; Weinsheimer, 1998; Batzer, 1997).

Summary of the Review

The review of literature for this study provided this researcher with a view of how interrelated the issues of students' leaving or persisting in college are. Reasons students persist in college are many, and often have to do with the student's goals for being in

college, their academic preparation, the student's commitment to the institution, and the significant relationships formed between student and faculty (Astin, 1993; Beal, 1982; Gerber, et. al., 1992; Tinto, 1993). This researcher attempted to discern the unique challenges two-year colleges face in retaining students on academic probation and found that, though two-year colleges do have challenges that set them apart from their four-year counterparts, their students share many of the characteristics of four-year college students when it comes to what makes students succeed academically in college. Gerber, Reiff, and Ginsberg (1992) found that successful students with learning disabilities used much the same academic strategies as other college students who are successful academically in college. Those same study strategies can be taught to other students, with or without disabilities to help them become more successful in college.

Overall Strengths of the Literature

Studies that specifically addressed student retention in two-year colleges were difficult to find, and not often generalizable to other situations because of their specificity to a problem at a particular college. There are, however, many studies that address problems of student retention in general (Attinasi, 1989; Baron, 1997; Bean, 1990; Gillespie & Noble, 1992; Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1993; Tracy-Mumford, 1994; York, 1999). The literature was consistent in pointing to many similar themes institutions should look for to lower attrition rates. Provision of comprehensive academic advising, orientation, academic support systems, and significant contact with faculty both in and outside the classroom, were common suggestions. Measuring progress of retention efforts also follows some common strands. The measure of persistence from

the first to the second year of college is a benchmark used in postsecondary education and national studies of postsecondary institutions. There are historical data dating back nearly twenty years that colleges can compare their student retention to. Knowing that American two-year colleges, on average, lose close to half of their students in this timeframe each year (ACT, 1999) helps make a strong case for studying retention in two-year colleges, and as Tinto (1993) puts it, discovering "the causes and cures of student attrition." Each context is, however unique in many ways, so colleges must find the keys to successful retention programming through their own institutional research.

Overall Weaknesses of the Literature

The focus on academic probationary students specifically as a definable cohort in need of intervention at the two-year college level yielded few results. Looking at students in academic trouble in general, however, did reap some helpful results. Gerber, Reiff, and Ginsberg (1996), Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg (1992, 1995, 1997), Reiff (1997), and Weinsheimer (1998) showed that students with academic goals, who can use time management, note taking, and other study strategies well tend to be successful in college. They found that students who find themselves in academic trouble in college often lack competence in these areas and benefit from being taught how to use them. There were not a large number of studies dealing with academic probationary students, though the few found were quite consistent in their approaches and findings. More research linking the different characteristics of two-year college students and academic success are needed, as separate from those done in the four-year setting. Many two-year

college studies were too particular to the campus and population studied to be helpful in understanding retention in general, in the two-year setting.

The risk factors for persistence that nontraditional aged college students often face, unfortunately, are mainly beyond the control of most colleges (Horn, 1996). More can be found out, however, in terms of creative delivery systems for degrees, student services, academic support needs, and educational goals of nontraditional students that may clarify the current understanding of the ability of two-year colleges in retaining these students.

Avenues for Further Inquiry

Though students in academic distress may be an avenue in need of further research, it may be more important to monitor numbers of students who go on academic probation as a secondary measure of the success of other retention-focused activities in colleges. Theoretically, the numbers of students on academic probation should fall if earlier retention interventions are working well. By the time students are on academic probation, it might be too late for some students. They may decide not to persist even to their probationary semester because of the stigma of being on probation, or any number of other reasons. It might be more important to investigate questions such as: Is it important for a college to survey students' entry-levels of study skills, just as they do academic achievement? How do various academic policies affect student persistence? What types of early-interventions are effective in developing student study strategy competence? What are the key study strategies needed for success in college? What sub-groups of nontraditional students that would be helpful to identify for retention

intervention efforts? These are just some of the questions that could provide opportunities for further inquiry.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter this researcher reviewed the state of the research on the topics of student retention and attrition, academic probationary student persistence, and persistence in two-year colleges. Two-year colleges have retention challenges related to their missions, and to the fact that they are often non-residential. Though most of the literature focuses on programs and systems at colleges to prevent students from academic trouble, several studies pointed to some specific interventions that could be effective in helping students on academic probation return to good academic standing.

The methodologies of academic probation studies were quite consistent, comparing grade point averages of students the semester before probation and then in the actual probationary semester. Chapter 3 continues this discussion and provides a description of the methodologies used in this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The methodology used to study the problem of the leadership at the Helena College of Technology not knowing whether students on academic probation were helped through their participation in the Goal Planning Program (GPP) is described in detail below. The rationale for using a quasi-experimental design in this action research project is also discussed in full. An overview of the statistical tests used to analyze the data from this study is provided to help answer the questions posed in the study: (1) Did the Goal Planning Program used at Helena College of Technology in the spring of 2000 have a positive effect on the grades and persistence to the next semester of the students who participated in it? (2) Did the students who participated in the GPP improve their grades more and persist to graduation at a higher rate than the students on academic probation who did not participate in the program?

Participants

Population

Participants in this study were full-time students whose grade point averages (GPA) in the fall semester of 2000 placed them on academic probation at Helena College of Technology (HCT) for spring semester of 2001. According to the Montana University System's and HCT's academic policies, any student whose grade point average (GPA)

for the semester falls below 2.00 on a 4.00 scale is placed on academic probation for the following semester. This allows the student a semester to raise his/her GPA above the 2.00 level. If the student's GPA falls below 2.00 for two consecutive semesters, he/she will be suspended from the college (HCT catalog, 2000-2001).

Of the 796 students enrolled in the fall of 2000, 103 students were placed on academic probation for spring semester 2001. Of those 103 students, 61 enrolled in classes for spring 2001 (HCT fall 2000 and spring 2001 Banner enrollment and grade reports). While the number of students placed on academic probation seems large in comparison to the number of students who enrolled the next semester, the former number represents students who attended classes, tried, and yet earned a GPA below 2.00 and also students who, for various reasons, quit attending classes early in the semester and received all failing grades because of no effort or extremely poor attendance (Suttorp, L., Assistant Registrar, personal interview, January 29, 2001). These students' GPAs for the semester would be reflected as 0.00. Ms. Suttorp indicated that those students who rarely attended classes often do not enroll the next semester. Of the 61 students who enrolled on academic probation for spring 2001, 13 had 0.00 GPAs for fall 2000 (HCT fall 2000 Banner grade reports).

The number of students who began the spring semester of 2001 on academic probation was slightly higher than what would be expected based on previous years. In the previous three spring semesters 55 (1998), 51 (1999), and 41 (2000) students started the semester on academic probation (Spring 1998, 1999, and 2000 HCT 15th Day Enrollment Reports). Overall enrollment at HCT had risen in these years and may

account for the somewhat higher number of students on academic probation in spring 2001.

Selection of Participants

In applying the Goal Planning Program used at Mount Saint Mary's College and Western Maryland College, it was not possible to mandate participation in the GPP at HCT, as had been done in Reiff's (1997) and in Gibbon's (2000) studies. The population studied at HCT was a subset of the general population of students on academic probation at Helena College of Technology for the spring semester of 2001. At the beginning of the semester all students who had been placed on academic probation were sent a letter from the Assistant Dean for Student Services, notifying them of their probationary status and encouraging their meeting with the researcher or HCT's Academic Counselor to begin participation in the Goal Planning Program (GPP). Not all of these students followed the advice, however. Only 34 of the 61 students who were on probation made the decision to participate. The participant group, therefore, is a volunteer group since it is neither the whole group of academic probationary students nor a random sample of that group. The reasons some students decided to participate and others did not are not known at this time, though there were some slight demographic differences in the groups. The characteristics of the students in general differed more from those of the students in Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) studies. These differences are discussed below.

Demographics

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the participant group and the comparison group, which was the group of students who were on academic probation for spring semester 2001, but chose not to participate in the study. The 34 participants in the GPP

consisted of 14 men and 20 women. Academic programs represented in this group were Office Technology, Computer Technology, Diesel Technology, Electronics Technology, Automotive Technology, Accounting Technology, Practical Nursing, and Associate of Science. The largest numbers of students were in Computer Technology (11) and Office Technology (8), with the other programs represented by from one to four students in this study. Fifteen of the students were of non-traditional college age (over 23) and nine were of traditional college age (18-23). Spring of 2001 was the second semester of college for all but two of the study participants. Those two were beginning their third semesters. The average fall 2000 grade point average (GPA) of all students on probation was 1.04, but the participant group had a higher average of 1.25.

Table 1. Demographic differences between HCT's participant and comparison groups.

HCT Academic Probationary Students, Spring 2001		
	GPP Participants	Comparison Group
Males	14	16
Females	20	11
Average GPA Fall 2000	1.25	0.78
Average GPA Spring 2001	1.45	0.88
Traditional Age (<24)	15 (44%)	16 (59%)
Nontraditional Age (>23)	19 (56%)	11 (41%)
Mean Age	29.26	25.56
College Program		
Traditional Trade AAS degree (Auto, Diesel, Construction, Metals)	4 (12% of participants)	8 (30% of comparison group)
Technical/Health AAS degree (Computer Tech, Electronics Tech, Accounting Tech, Office Tech, Nursing)	26 (76% of participants)	14 (52% of comparison group)
Transfer (Associate of Science)	4 (12% of participants)	5 (18% of comparison group)

The comparison group consisted of 27 students who were on academic probation, but decided not to participate in the Goal Planning Program. The group included 16 men and 11 women. The college programs represented were the same as the participating group, with the addition of one student in Protective Services. The largest numbers of students were in Construction (5) and Associate of Science (5). The other programs were represented by from one to three students. In general, the comparison group was younger than the group of participants, with 59% of them in the traditional age range. The average fall 2000 grade point average of the comparison group was 0.78, which was lower than that of the participating group.

As stated, it is not known why the students in the comparison group chose not to participate or why those who chose to participate made their decisions. A more in-depth look at this issue may lead to a better understanding of the retention risks of both groups. For the purposes of this study, however, the focus was on the group who chose to participate in the GPP and whether the program may have played a significant role in their academic performance. As illustrated in Table 2, study participants possess many of the seven characteristics typical of nontraditional students Horn (1995) found that are also generally related negatively to persistence in college.

Table 2. HCT participants with the characteristics of nontraditional students that Horn (1995) found to be negatively related to college persistence.

Characteristics	Financially Independent	Part-time Student	Delayed Enrollment	Work Full-time	Dependents	Single Parent
# of Participants	19	0	27	6	15	10

Early in the study, it was apparent to the advisors in the program that the issues that were interfering with students' academics were quite different from those discussed in Reiff's study. The issues participants in this study had of family, work, health, and financial problems were not seen as often in Reiff's description of student issues. For this reason, the researcher decided to examine the differences between the population in this study and Reiff's, to better understand the impact the the differences might have on study outcomes. A fundamental difference between participants in this study and participants in Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) studies was age. Both of the other studies were primarily comprised of traditional aged participants. Another difference was in the type of academic program the participants were enrolled in. Table 3 shows a comparison between Reiff's (1997) population and HCT's.

Table 3. Comparison of known demographics of Helena College of Technology and Western Maryland College Goal Planning Program participants.

Comparison of HCT and WMC Populations		
	HCT GPP Participants (Spring '01)	WMC GPP Participants (Spring '95)
Participants	34	78
Average GPA prior Fall	1.25	1.69
Average GPA Spring	1.45	2.23
Traditional Age (<24)	15 (44%)	74 (95%)
Nontraditional Age (>23)	19 (56%)	4 (5%)
College Program		
Traditional Trade AAS degree (Auto, Diesel, Construction, Metals)	4 (12% of participants)	0
Technical/Health AAS degree (Computer Tech, Electronics Tech, Accounting Tech, Office Tech, Nursing)	26 (76% of participants)	0
Transfer (Associate of Science)/ Bachelor's degree	4 (12% of participants)	78 (100% of participants)

As Table 3 shows, the population studied at HCT was quite different demographically from the participants in Reiff's (1997) study. Though these differences, coupled with the characteristics in Table 2, may help explain some of the discrepancies found between Reiff's (1997) study and this study, further inquiry would be needed to establish their influences.

The Study

Goal Planning Program Components

The Goal Planning Program the probationary students at HCT participated in has five essential elements. These elements are: (a) Previous semester evaluation; (b) Setting of long and short-term goals; (c) Use of applicable study strategies; (d) Tracking of present semester grades; and (e) Regular meetings between an advisor and each participating student. Forms to guide each step of the process were identical to the forms Reiff (1997) developed and Gibbon (2000) used. Both of the advisors in this study used the forms for meetings with the participants and recorded dates and meeting notes in efforts to carry out each element as consistently as possible. These forms may be viewed in Appendix B. In addition to the use of standardized forms for execution of the GPP with students, the advisors obtained grades for students from the college's Banner Student Information System. Grades from the students' previous semester and the semester they participated in the GPP were collected. Meeting notes were kept by both advisors detailing each student's attendance patterns in classes, assignment grades, referrals the advisor made to campus resources, and any issues that came up for the student over the course of the semester.

Validity

Validation in an action research study such as this one is an important part of understanding results of the study (Gay and Airasian, 2000, p. 600). This researcher included several elements in the study to enhance the validity of the study overall. First, the study was a general replication of studies done by Reiff (1997) and Gibbon (2000), but using it on a different type of population. Second, standard forms and interview protocol were used by both advisors who worked with participants in the study on the Goal Planning Program. Third, standard data were gathered for all participants in the study, including GPA and graduation as the main quantitative measures available, and meeting notes from all meetings with participants over the course of the semester. Students also kept their own grade records in a standard format used by all participants. The objective grade data, and the use of outside comparison data, according to Gay and Airasian (2000), contribute to the validity of an action research study such as this.

While not indicating a cause and effect relationship, using grades as a measure of whether the GPP helped the students or not, was consistent with Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) methodologies. Using the same measures would lend some external validity to Reiff's and Gibbon's research, and give this study an external comparison as well. Program completion, or graduation, was also recorded for this study, though not an element of Reiff's or Gibbon's studies.

Development

The main tools used in the study were developed by Henry Reiff (1997) and were used in their original form. Reiff developed them through his work with Gerber and

Ginsberg as they studied what techniques and support successful students with learning disabilities used, as opposed to students with disabilities who were unsuccessful in college. The tools included a student contract, previous semester evaluation, goal planning forms, and a grade tracking sheet (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1992). Each is described briefly below, with samples included in Appendix B.

Contract. Explains the components of the GPP and contains a place for the participant to sign that he/she understands the components and intends to participate diligently.

Previous semester evaluation. Questions to guide the initial session with the student so that the interviews were consistent. The questions include the student's overall reaction to the previous semester, what was good about it, what was bad about it, ways the student can improve, and ways the student has been successful in the past.

Goal planning form. This form provides the avenue for planning specific grade and performance goals with the student for college in general, and then specifically for the courses he/she is taking currently. The form helps the student and the counselor estimate the time that may be required of the student per week in study and in class to accomplish the grade goals the student sets. It also provides space to identify strengths and weaknesses the student has in regard to their ability to meet the goals, thus identifying the campus support systems that may be necessary for the student to utilize.

Grade tracking sheet. This form is used by the student to identify how he/she will be graded in each course, and also to keep track of all grades received throughout the

semester. These sheets are kept by the student and brought to each meeting with the advisor.

Graduation. At the end of spring semester of 2003, all participants' and comparison group members' academic records in the Banner system were checked for completion of the requirements of a program of study and application for graduation.

Along with using Reiff's tools for working directly with GPP participants, this researcher also followed Reiff's (1997) evaluation model. Reiff compared the mean GPA of all students with less than 2.00 semester GPAs (and were therefore placed on academic probation) with the mean GPA at the end of the following semester (the one they participated in the GPP). This researcher did the same for all HCT GPP participants for spring semester of 2001. The GPP results at HCT could then be compared to Reiff's results.

Further, comparisons between participation in the GPP and gender, age, GPA, and graduation were made. Gender and age were investigated because of the perceived demographic differences between Reiff's (1997) population and the participants in this study.

Research Design

Rationale

This action research project used a quasi-experimental design that was modeled in method after the projects at WMC and MSMC in Maryland by Reiff (1997) and Gibbon (2000), respectively. In both of those cases, and at HCT, the researcher was involved in the studies personally as one of the advisors who met regularly with students on

probation. In the HCT project, all 61 students on academic probation who were enrolled in the spring semester of 2001 were eligible to participate in the project, though 27 choose not to. In Reiff's and Gibbon's studies all students eligible to participate did participate, so they simply compared their participants' grades from one semester to the semester they participated in the GPP using a dependent t-test. HCT's Assistant Dean for Student Services chose not to require participation in the GPP beyond a strongly worded letter to each student urging him or her to participate (Doney, M, Hay, J., Williams, A., business meeting, October 13, 2000). The group felt that students should not be required to participate before the institution knew whether or not the program would benefit them. For this reason, this researcher was able to compare the participants' grades in the two semesters, as well as to compare them with the group who chose not to participate.

Invalidity and Minimization

As with any action research, questions arise about the validity and reliability of the study when the researcher is involved in the work being studied. This study was no different, except for some characteristics that were designed to minimize the effects of the researcher's personal involvement. As stated earlier, the study was carried out as a replication of two similar studies at two other small colleges (Reiff, 1997; Gibbon, 2000). The element that was not replicated was the environment the GPP was carried out in. The students and institution type are both different from the original study's. To ensure that this study replicated those studies as closely as possible, however, the researcher used the same forms, data collection techniques, and comparison data as the studies done by Reiff (1997) and Gibbon (2000). Even though the number of participants

in the study was low, another academic counselor worked with some of the students so that the researcher was not the only advisor working with students.

A common element that can affect validity in action research that is related to the researcher's involvement in the study is that often the researcher can be in the position to bias the quantitative measures for the study. In this study, that was not a factor. The quantitative element measured was student GPA, and neither the researcher nor the other advisor working with the GPP participants graded the students in any course they were enrolled in. Instructors who graded students did not know which students in their classes were participating in the GPP.

Two potential problems in the study were the low numbers of students available to participate and the voluntary nature of their participation. A total of 61 probationary students were enrolled at HCT spring semester of 2001, and only 34 of those participated in the study. This translated to a small number of students participating in the study and also a small number of students to compare to. The sample of students in the study was not randomly selected, so again, the generalizability of the study could be called into question. Because this was anticipated, due to the trend of academic probationary student numbers over the previous years at HCT, the researcher compared her results to both Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) results. The difficulty in comparing results of this type of study from one college population to another became apparent when the comparisons were made, illustrating the problems of generalizing the study to a population different from the original study's. As illustrated earlier in this chapter, the population at HCT was quite different in age and institution type.

Procedure

This study was conducted closely adhering to Reiff's (1997) research design. A list was generated from HCT's student information system of all students placed on academic probation as a result of low GPAs from fall semester 2000. This list was checked against the students who then enrolled for classes for spring semester, 2001. A total of 61 students enrolled on academic probation for spring 2001. Before classes began a letter was sent to each of the academic probationary students informing them of their probationary status and strongly urging them to meet with either this researcher or the counselor the first week of the spring semester to begin the Goal Planning Program. 34 students met with the recommended staff and participated in the GPP for the semester.

Throughout the semester, students met with one of the advisors regularly, kept records of their own grades as courses progressed, and worked through the GPP. The advisors worked with individual students to strengthen study skills, make scheduling adjustments, and refer on to campus or community resources as needed. At the end of spring semester, 2001, official grades were again collected from the Banner system for other students on academic probation for that semester.

Comparisons of semester GPAs were made between participating students and all students who were on academic probation at HCT spring semester 2001 (the comparison group). Semester GPAs from fall 2000 were compared to the GPAs of the same students for spring 2001. An overall increase in GPA concurrent with use of the Goal Planning Program would provide a degree of support for the program. The mean GPAs were examined, as well as the numbers of students whose GPAs either increased or decreased in the probationary semester. In Gibbon's (2000) study, dependent t-tests were

performed to test the statistical significance of the differences between GPAs of the students in the semester before the probationary semester and the semester they were on probation and participating in the GPP. The same was done in this study.

Analysis Strategy

In order to understand whether the Goal Planning Program improved participating students' GPAs, the data collected from this study were analyzed following Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) strategies. The individual fall 2000 GPAs of the students on academic probation during spring semester 2001 were compared with their GPAs for spring 2001. Also, the mean GPAs for these students the semester before their academic probationary one (fall 2000) were compared with the mean GPA for their probationary semester (spring 2001). The participants' mean GPA was also compared with the mean GPA of the comparison group. In these comparisons, a t-test was performed to assess the significance of the differences in the means, using .10 as the level of significance sought.

The same procedure was used to compare GPP participants' ages with the comparison group's; participants' gender with the comparison group's, and participants' completion of an academic program with the comparison group's. For example, a significant rise in mean GPA of study participants would indicate the GPP may offer some benefit to students who participate. Comparing the GPAs of participants against non-participating students on academic probation could also offer some indication of whether or not the GPP benefits students who participate. Though these comparisons could prove to be indicators one way or the other of the GPP's relative value to those who participate and those who do not, this study cannot prove causality.

Timeframe

A pilot semester of the Goal Planning Program was in progress when the researcher decided to approach studying it for this thesis. Fall 2000 was the pilot semester for the program, and few students participated in it. As stated earlier, there are traditionally fewer students who enroll on academic probation during the fall semesters at HCT. The researcher wanted to study a larger pool of students, so chose to study the students who were placed on academic probation for spring 2001. The timeframe for the study, then, was from late fall 2000 through May 2001, with data collection and analysis following. Later, at the end of spring semester of 2003, graduation information was also collected for both the comparison group and the participant group. With spring 2001 being the first semester HCT was on the Banner system, it took more time than expected to obtain reports from the system. Staff were still learning the system, and reporting was one of the later tasks to be instituted with the program. Some of the reports were not available until well into the 2002 academic year.

Chapter Summary

As an action research study with a quasi-experimental design, this study's methodology was chosen because it would help the Helena College of Technology find out whether students on academic probation were helped through the use of the Goal Planning Program. The researcher's direct involvement in the study was necessary because of her job at HCT, and because the staff is so small that for her not to be involved would have put an undue burden on coworkers. Further, the study was a

general replication of studies done by Reiff (1997) and Gibbon (2000), who were also involved in their studies. This methodology seemed to fit the study well, because the outcomes measured by the study (student grades and program completion) were not items the researcher had any control over, thus lessening researcher bias of the data.

Grade point averages and graduation rates are generally the measures of student success or failure in college. If the Goal Planning Program turns out to help students who participate in it to improve their grades, students can be helped to persist in college and to accomplish their individual goals for attendance. An examination of the findings of this study will help clarify whether this was true at HCT.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the Goal Planning Program at the Helena College of Technology improved students' grade point averages during their academic probationary semester. This study was conducted to answer the following questions: (1) Did the Goal Planning Program (GPP) have a positive effect on grades and persistence to the next semester of the students who participated in it? (2) Did the students who participated in the GPP improve their grades more and persist to graduation at a higher rate than the students on academic probation who did not participate in the program?

Dr. Henry Reiff developed the Goal Planning Program itself through his and his associates' research on successful college students with learning disabilities (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1992, 1995, 1997). The GPP is a program he used with students on academic probation that assisted the students in gaining the study skills they needed and in providing them with the other campus support systems important for their academic progress. The actual program used at Helena College of Technology will be explained later in this chapter.

To address the purpose of this study, all students placed on academic probation and enrolled in classes in spring of 2001 at the Helena College of Technology (HCT) were offered participation in the Goal Planning Program. The students who participated

in the GPP met with one of two advisors in the program throughout the semester of the study. The advisors worked with the participants to assess their academic performance in the prior semester, help them set academic goals for themselves, teach them study skills they lacked, help them monitor their own academic progress, and to refer them to appropriate outside or campus resources. The students who chose not to participate in the GPP were used in this study as a comparison group.

Data were gathered to assess the influence the GPP may have had on the participating students, and to compare them with the comparison group throughout the course of the study. This data included semester grades from fall semester of 2000 and spring semester 2001, age, program, and graduation (after spring semester 2003). The source of all of these data was HCT's Banner Student Information System. Advisors' meeting notes were also used in partial assessment of the program's usefulness to the participants.

Dependent t-tests were performed to compare mean semester GPAs of both the participant group and the comparison group from fall 2000 to spring 2001. The Pearson Chi Square test was used to measure whether participation in the GPP had a statistically significant relationship to participants graduating within three years. Independent t-tests were performed to measure whether participation in the GPP was related to student age or gender.

Findings

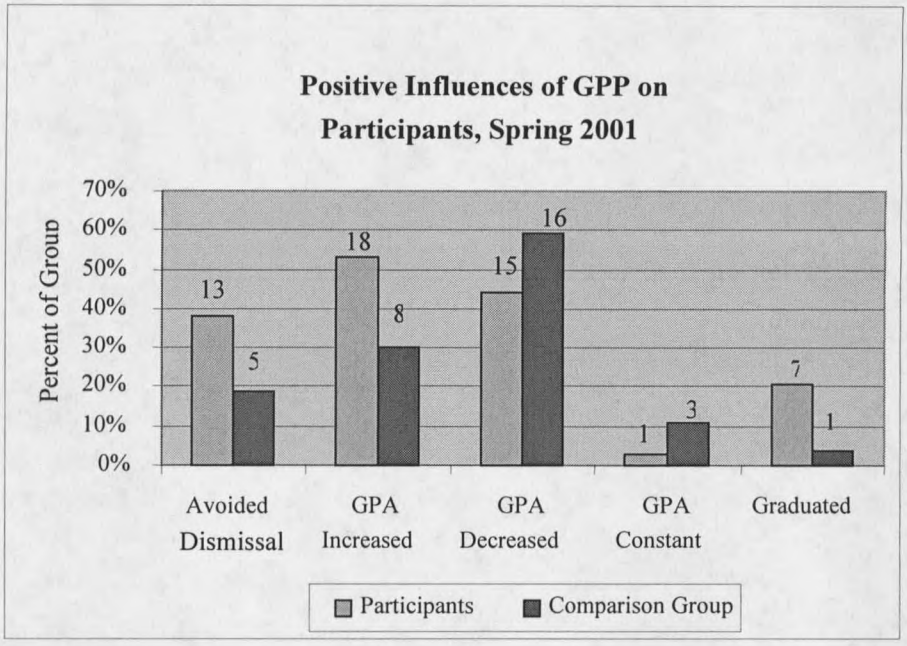
The population studied at HCT was a subset of the general population of students on academic probation at Helena College of Technology for the spring semester of 2001.

At the beginning of the semester all 61 students placed on academic probation for spring 2001 were sent a letter from the Assistant Dean for Student Services, notifying them of their probationary status and recommending that they meet with the researcher or the counselor (both hereafter referred to as advisors) to begin participation in the Goal Planning Program (GPP). Not all of these students followed the recommendation, however. Only 34 of the 61 eligible students made an appointment and met with one of the designated advisors. This enabled the researcher to use the group of 27 students who chose not to participate as a comparison group for the study.

Figure 1 is a representation of some positive trends noted between the participant group and the comparison group. Of the total of 34 participating students, 13 (38%) avoided dismissal by attaining at least a 2.00 GPA, 18 (53%) had an increase in GPA, 1 (3%) student's GPA stayed the same, 15 (44%) decreased their GPAs, and 7 (21%) eventually completed their academic programs (graduated). Of the comparison group total of 27 students, 5 (19%) avoided dismissal by attaining at least a 2.00 GPA, 8 (30%) had an increase in GPA, 3 (11%) students' GPAs stayed the same, 16 (59%) decreased their GPAs, and 1 (4%) eventually completed his/her academic program (graduated).

It appears from the percentages in Figure 1 that a relationship exists between participation in the GPP and generally better performance than the comparison group. However, the reader should be cautioned that percentages can be misleading. Because of the small numbers in both groups and the large standard deviations noted in Tables 4 through 7, statistically, the differences are not significant. Taken all together however, the consistently positive trend appearing in the participant group's data may be helpful in the final recommendations.

Figure 1. Positive trends related to GPP participation for spring 2001 HCT students on academic probation.



Data Analysis

The analysis of the data in this study follows Reiff's (1997) strategies, and in addition, includes graduation as a measure of success of the GPP. The only statistically significant relationship found was that between participation in the GPP and graduation. Discussion will follow on possibilities of why these findings differ from Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000).

In this study, the statistical tests were performed using a significance level of .10. Using this as the standard, only one of the null hypotheses was rejected. While other positive trends can be noted, there appears to be a significant relationship only between participation in the Goal Planning Program and eventual graduation from an academic program at HCT.

A Pearson Chi Square test was performed to evaluate whether there was a relationship between eventual graduation (completion of an academic program) and participation in the GPP. Table 4 shows the significance of the Chi Square to be .052. This researcher was able to reject the null hypothesis that the number of participants who graduated, compared to the total number of participants would be equal to the number of comparison group members who graduated, compared to the total number of students in the comparison group.

Table 4. Correlation of graduation with participation in the GPP.

Participation/Graduation	Graduated	Did Not Graduate	Pearson Chi Square Value	df	Significance
Participants	7	27	3.76	1	.052
Comparison Group	1	26			
H_0 = Number of participants who graduated compared to total participants = Number of comparison group who graduated compared to total comparison group					

The fall 2000 GPAs of all students on academic probation who enrolled in classes and participated in the GPP at HCT for spring semester 2001, were compared with their GPAs at the end of spring 2001. The mean GPA of the participants for fall 2000 (M = 1.246, SD = .588) increased .194 points in spring 2001 (M =1.44, SD=1.442), not a statistically significant difference (t = -.866), as shown in Table 5. The null hypothesis for this test was that the mean GPA of participants for the fall 2000 semester would be equal to the mean GPA for participants for the spring 2001 semester. This researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis for this test.

Table 5. Fall-to-spring GPA comparison for participants in the GPP

Participants/GPA	Mean	SD	t Value	df	Significance
Fall 2000 GPA	1.246	.588	-.866	33	.393
Spring 2001 GPA	1.44	1.442			
H_0 = Participants' mean fall 2000 GPA = Participants' mean spring 2001 GPA					

In an examination of the same measures with the comparison group, the mean GPA for fall 2000 (M = .7815, SD = .7204) increased .096 points in spring 2001 (M =.8781, SD=1.2937), not a statistically significant difference (t = -.30). As shown in Table 6, the researcher again failed to reject the null hypothesis, which was that the mean GPA for fall 2000 of the comparison group would be equal to their mean GPA for spring 2001.

Table 6. Fall-to-spring GPA comparison for comparison group.

Comparison Group GPA	Mean	SD	t Value	df	Significance
Fall 2000 GPA	.7815	.7204	-.30	26	.763
Spring 2001 GPA	.8781	1.2937			
H_0 = Comparison group's mean fall 2000 GPA = Comparison group's mean spring 2001 GPA					

The mean age of the participants and the comparison group were also compared. Table 7 shows the significance of this t-value to be .148, which is not significant at the .10 level. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis that the mean age of the participant group would be equal to the mean age of the comparison group.

Table 7. Comparison of mean age of participants with comparison group.

Age/Participation	Mean	SD	t Value	df	Significance
Participants	29.26	10.43	1.47	59	.148
Comparison Group	25.56	8.95			
H_0 = Participants' mean age = Comparison group's mean age					

Discussion of the Findings

Upon examination of the findings, it is clear that the Goal Planning Program did not have the same effect on participants at HCT as it did on Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) populations. That is not to say it did not have a positive influence on the participating students at HCT, but that it did not make the same statistically significant

difference in student grades, in particular, that it did in the earlier studies. To understand possible reasons why the results of this study differ from Reiff's and Gibbon's studies, the population differences and the qualitative data from this study were examined.

Comparison to Reiff's and Gibbon's Studies

As detailed in Table 3 in Chapter 3 of this study, the population in Reiff's (1997) study was nearly all (95%) traditional college aged students aged 18-23, living on campus, and attending a small, four-year, liberal arts college. The present study had a much wider age range of participants with the majority (56%) fitting the nontraditional age range of over 23 years. All participants in the present study lived off-campus, and the college they attended is a small two-year technical college. The barriers to persistence in college for the nontraditional aged students are quite different from those faced by traditional aged students attending a residential college. The latter are primarily students, with relatively few outside responsibilities to interfere with their ability to focus on their studies. Nontraditional students, in contrast, are often spouses, parents, and/or workers with their lives as students competing with their other roles for attention. Jobs and family obligations generally are competitors for a student's time that a college has little control over. Conversely, the relatively more narrow range of threats to a traditional aged residential student is often more within the scope of a college to address. Four-year residential campuses often have support systems such as counseling, health services, residence advisors, student life and recreation opportunities that two-year commuter campuses usually lack.

Specifically, in a review of the meeting notes kept by advisors in the GPP for this study, the differences between the nontraditional and traditional age groups are evident. Following are the answers to the question "What was bad about last semester?" that was asked of participants when they began the GPP.

Traditional aged students:

> "I didn't use my accommodations for my learning disability, and I didn't do well on tests. I think I learned more than my grades showed."
>
> "I think I just don't like the program I'm in. I don't like medical terminology and think I need to change what I'm doing."
>
> "I was overwhelmed with 18 credits and wasn't prepared for the amount of work. Then I had car problems and just quit coming to school."
>
> "I wasn't very interested in my classes and had transportation problems."
>
> "I just didn't go to classes as much as I should have. I guess I felt like it wasn't required, and after high school, well, it just felt good to be able to choose, but I chose not to go to class more than I thought."
>
> "I didn't use my accommodations, and didn't manage my time very well."

Non-traditional aged students:

> "I had health problems, so was sick and missed a lot of school. I need to be more assertive with my doctors and quit smoking."
>
> "I hate reading, so I didn't read my assignments, and then I was helping my sister-in-law with her problems and got side-tracked. When things get hard, I get side-tracked by my kids and other family who live with us."
>
> "Last semester I overloaded myself with full-time school and full-time work and created a stressful environment. My kids needed me."
>
> "Last semester was awful because of things happening with my family. My dad had a stroke, my mom had heart problems, and then my daughter's school discovered she couldn't see out of one eye."

"Back pain got too bad. I had to take care of my kids, and we had to go help out my brother-in-law when he and his family had a bad car accident."

"I was overwhelmed with the amount I had to learn. Studying for three to four hours a day didn't get me there. I feel so rusty!"

"My mother was very ill and needed my care at home."

"It is all just really hard, and I probably need to study even more. I can't study at home because I'm living with relatives and don't really have my own space. They have little kids and I have to help out with them too."

"I had bad family problems. My ex-husband was harassing me and one of my sons ended up being picked up for drugs at my house. I need to stay in school because this is the only thing good in my life."

These statements were support Tinto's (1993) assertion that the various outside obligations older students often have that compete for their time and attention are threats to retention that traditional aged students generally do not share. Colleges have little influence over these threats. Colleges have more influence over the more typical traditional aged student needs, such as help with time management, advising into a more appropriate program, academic help, and disability accommodations (p. 64).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1993) reference the higher attrition rates, in general, that two-year colleges have in comparison to four-year colleges (p. 373); and the "clear evidence that living on campus exerts a net positive impact on persistence and degree attainment" (p. 378). Possibly the different results obtained in this study from Reiff's and Gibbon's studies are attributable to the population differences inherent between two-year commuter campuses and four-year residential campuses.

Reiff's (1997) study showed statistically significant increases in mean grades from semester to semester with the participants in his study. Participants' grades in the

current study showed an increase, though not statistically significant. However, the current study's participants also showed a larger increase in mean grades than the comparison group in the study. Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) groups showed significant rises in the number of students avoiding academic dismissal. The current study's participants also avoided dismissal in higher numbers and percentages than its comparison group. It is possible that the demographic differences in the populations in the studies contributed to the varying results.

Graduation and GPP Participation

The current study provided evidence that a positive relationship exists between participation in the GPP and eventual graduation from an academic program (Figure 5). Further examination of this finding in terms of the qualitative data gathered in this study may aid in understanding the GPP's role in the participants' positive graduation rate.

GPP advisors' notes from their meetings with the seven participants in the current study who graduated by spring 2003 were examined for clues about why the GPP seemed to make a difference for them. The notes from these students' meetings reveal some patterns. All but one student in this group were nontraditional aged students. The exception was enrolled in a trade program and had a learning disability but he had not used his approved accommodations for in the fall of 2000. He benefited from the regular check-ins he had with his GPP advisor, using his approved accommodations, the encouragement he got from his advisor, and assistance with problem-solving and study skills.

The meeting notes from the seven GPP participants who graduated show that all seven had maintained regular meeting schedules with his/her advisor, with the fewest number of meetings being 12. Meeting notes reflect that three students had undiagnosed learning disabilities, or undisclosed mental illnesses. All three of these students benefited from connecting to the appropriate campus services to help them with their individual issues. One student simply seemed to enjoy and benefit from the relationship he formed with his advisor, along with the assistance with study skills he received. Though not required after his probationary semester, he continued the weekly meetings with his advisor until he graduated. Notes from all seven show that time was spent on study strategies, tracking grades, and time management techniques.

The above supports Tinto's assertion that "there is just no substitute for personal contact," and also that the commitment staff and faculty have to students must be "intentional and personal" for retention efforts to be effective (1997, p. 194). The meeting notes from the current study underscore Reiff and his associates' original research that laid the groundwork for the GPP in indicating that the probationary students needed to be taught some effective study skills, benefited from learning time management techniques, and benefited from having a solid personal connection with someone at the college (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1992, 1995, 1997).

Contradictory Finding

It is clear from an examination of the semester GPAs and the advisors' meeting notes that many participants, in spite of the GPP, were unsuccessful. Four participants earned a GPA of 0.00 in fall 2000, while ten participants earned 0.00 GPAs for the spring

semester of 2001, when they participated in the GPP. In the comparison group, the 0.00 GPAs earned were a less dramatic rise from 9 in the fall to 12 in the spring. It would appear that the GPP actually had a negative effect on some students' persistence. However, it is evident from the meeting notes of these students who failed, shown in Table 8, that their problems were beyond HCT's control. The notes also show the life issues they faced that related generally to their age status as either traditional or nontraditional. Table 8 shows the GPAs and a summary of the meeting notes of each student who earned a 0.00 GPA in either fall or spring semester of the study.

According to the meeting notes from the participants, it was common for the traditional aged students to simply quit attending and not communicate with the college after they had made their decision not to come back. The nontraditional students, in general, indicated a desire to withdraw formally, though they did not do it on time for their transcripts to reflect their intentions. Compared to the traditional aged participants, the nontraditional students also had a variety of outside influences that took them away from their studies. The influences included personal, health, and family issues as well as academic preparation issues.

Only one of these participants eventually graduated from an academic program. She was a nontraditional aged female who was placed on academic probation after her second semester at HCT, which was fall of 2000. She had earned above a 3.00 GPA prior to that semester and then had to leave college very near the end of fall semester 2000 to care for her ill mother. Meeting notes reflect that her mother's situation had been resolved and this student could refocus on her studies again just as well as she had in her first semester. The other participants who earned 0.00 in either their fall 2000 or spring

2001 semesters were not successful in completing their programs of study.

Table 8. Explanations of grades of participants earning 0.00 GPAs in either fall 2000 or spring 2001 semester

Participants Who Earned 0.00 GPA in Either Semester of the Study				
Student #	Fall GPA	Spring GPA	Age	Meeting Notes
10	0.00	0.00	NT	4 meetings; continued poor attendance, not interested in classes, quit attending after 2 months, unable to contact him.
16	0.00	0.14	NT	6 meetings; trying hard to stay focused, struggling with sobriety, suspect a relapse, unable to contact after 6 weeks of classes.
17	0.00	0.50	T	3 meetings; still missing classes, not cooperative with time mgmt. systems, not interested in classes, unable to contact him after 2 ½ months of classes.
30	0.00	3.54	NT	12 meetings; life issues all under her control now, graduated 12/02.
4	1.15	0.00	T	4 meetings; decided was not ready for school, withdrew, but too late for grades not to show.
6	1.75	0.00	T	3 meetings; not sure school is what she wants, parents want her here, quit attending after 4 weeks, contacted her by phone to recommend she come in to talk about withdrawal, never came in.
7	1.75	0.00	T	5 meetings; thinks he may have an LD, missed appt for psych testing, quit going to class, unable to contact him after 1 month of classes.
21	1.00	0.00	T	7 meetings; very motivated, enthusiastic about the program, puzzled at why classes seem so much harder than high school, suddenly quit coming to meetings & classes. Follow-up uncovered mental illness & crisis incident.
24	1.11	0.00	T	5 meetings; nursing program difficult for her, does not seem to be able to make time for study, learning study skills, classes, and baby. Withdrew after deadline.
26	1.00	0.00	T	7 meetings; nursing program hard, really wants to be a nurse, difficulty with an instructor because of absences, struggling with a part-time job, withdrew after deadline.
27	1.15	0.00	NT	8 meetings; missed for illness, disappeared 2 months into the semester, unable to contact her.
31	0.83	0.00	NT	5 meetings; all going really well (A's and Bs), then missing from classes, unable to contact her.
34	1.00	0.00	T	8 meetings; injured early in semester (concussion), had a hard time catching up in classes after absence, missed more because afraid to go back to classes, finally advised to withdraw, evidently did not.

Weakness in the Data

One weakness in the data collected in the course of this study came from not being able to look at a correlation between academic success and the number of meetings the advisors had with each student. One advisor kept very accurate records, while the other advisor indicated that he did not keep as accurate of records. Gibbon (2000) found a correlation between grades and number of meetings with the advisors in his program, but it is not known if the same would have been observed in the current study.

Summary of Findings

The findings in this study did not parallel the findings in the studies done by Reiff (1997) and Gibbon (2000). In this study, the only statistically significant relationship found was one between participation in the Goal Planning Program and completion of an academic program. While this was not an aspect of either Reiff's (1997) or Gibbon's (2000) studies, it was the strongest relationship with participation in the GPP found at HCT. The measure of mean GPA from participants' fall 2000 semester to spring 2001 when they participated in the GPP and were on academic probation, did not prove to be significant. When participants' mean semester grades were compared to the comparison group's mean semester grades, no significant relationship was evident.

Besides the statistically significant relationship of program completion to GPP participation, some positive trends may be noted. As illustrated in Figure 1, the participant group consistently showed better performance in general than the comparison group in the areas of number and percent of students who increased their GPA (even though 6 more of the participants earned 0.00 GPAs in the spring semester than in the

fall); number and percent of students who avoided dismissal; number and percent of students whose GPA decreased; and number and percent of students who graduated. All of these measures, except the graduation measure, followed the trends observed in Reiff's and Gibbon's studies.

Chapter Summary

The findings in this study help provide the leadership at HCT with information toward answering the question of whether or not the Goal Planning Program had a positive effect on the grades and persistence to their next semester of the students who participated in it. It also lends some support to the second question of whether the students who participated in the GPP improve their grades more and graduate at a higher rate than the students on academic probation who did not participate in the program. The help this study lends is that it does suggest that the GPP helped participating students complete their programs at a higher rate than the students who were on academic probation who did not participate. It will be up to HCT's leadership to decide whether the positive trends indicated by the findings of this study are strong enough for them to continue to support the GPP. Possibilities for more inquiry may be the next step, and will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The problem addressed in this study was that the leadership at the Helena College of Technology (HCT) in Helena, Montana did not know whether students on academic probation were helped to persist at a higher rate through the use of the Goal Planning Program (GPP) as an intervention with students in their probationary semester. The purpose of this quasi-experimental study was to investigate whether the GPP, which had demonstrated success at two small four-year institutions in Maryland, improved students' grade point averages during their probationary semester and improved the rate at which students were retained at HCT. The research questions were: (1) Did the Goal Planning Program have a positive effect on the grades and persistence to the next semester of the students who participated in it? (2) Did the students who participated in the GPP improve their grades more and persist to graduation at a higher rate than the students on academic probation who did not participate in the program?

Summary of the Methodology

The study was an action research study with a quasi-experimental design, meaning that it had elements of an experimental design, but lacked a true control group, and had a small, mostly volunteer sample group. The researcher was involved in the work being studied. The study was a replication of earlier studies conducted by Henry Reiff, Ph.D. at Western Maryland College, and Thomas Gibbon at Mount Saint Mary's

College, both in Maryland (Reiff, 1997; Gibbon, 2000), but done with a different institution type and students. Reiff and Gibbon studied the effects the Goal Planning Program had on their academic probationary students. The program, developed by Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg, had demonstrated success in assisting students to improve their grades and be removed from academic probation (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1992, 1995, 1997).

In the current study, students who had been placed on academic probation for spring semester, 2001 at HCT were mailed a letter from the college informing them of their probationary status and recommending they participate in the Goal Planning Program (GPP). Participation in the program was not mandatory, and consequently not all students eligible to participate did participate. Of the 61 students on academic probation that semester, 34 participated in the GPP. The remaining 27 probationary students were used in the study as a comparison group.

Participants in the GPP at Helena College of Technology met with one of the two advisors for the program to assess their performance in the prior semester, plan strategies for improvement, set grade and study goals, track grades, and utilize other elements of the GPP. Participants were to meet with the advisor they chose every one to three weeks throughout the semester for support and monitoring. Advisors helped students with study strategies, adjustments to their schedules, and referrals to campus and community services as needed. Advisors also kept notes from the weekly meetings to track student progress and activity. Participants kept records of their own grades, assignments, and progress for their own monitoring and time management.

Summary of the Findings

Evaluating the GPP at Helena College of Technology was done through the collection of official grades from fall semester, 2000 and spring semester, 2001 for both the participant group and the comparison group from HCT's Banner Student Information System. Individual student, as well as mean semester grades of the groups were compared. After the spring semester of 2003, graduation data were added to the comparisons between the groups to find out whether or not participants and comparison group students had completed their programs of study within three years.

Statistical analyses of the grade and graduation data were performed, including t-tests and cross tabulations. A statistically significant difference was found between the number of participants who eventually graduated from their programs of study and the number of students who graduated who were part of the comparison group. In the participant group, seven students finished their programs of study within three years, representing 21% of the participant group. Only one student in the comparison group graduated, representing 4% of that group. This difference was significant at the .052 level using the Pearson Chi Square test.

Other findings indicated a general positive trend associated with participation in the GPP. In general, more of the participants' grades rose from fall to spring semester, and by a larger margin than did the comparison group's grades. Fewer of the participant group's grades decreased from fall to spring semester than did those in the comparison group. More of the participants improved their grades enough to be removed from academic probation, and thus avoided dismissal than did those in the comparison group. These trends are illustrated in Figure 1 in Chapter 4.

Other relationships were investigated, and were not found to be statistically significant. Relationships were investigated between participation in the GPP and students' ages, between participants' mean GPA for fall 2000 and spring 2001, and between the comparison group's mean GPA for fall 2000 and spring 2001.

Summary of the Conclusions.

The findings in this study suggest that the HCT Goal Planning Program helped students who participated to graduate at a higher rate than they would have if they had not participated in the program. Shorter-term measures, such as semester-to-semester retention, however, did not reveal a strong retention influence from participation in the GPP. Instead, the longer-term measure of graduation rate seemed to be the most important to examine. The results of the data analysis in this study suggest that student participation in the GPP had a positive effect on participants' ability to persist beyond their academic probationary semester and on to eventually graduate from their academic programs.

Other indications that the GPP had a general positive influence on the participants are that common retention measures, when examined together, were all more positive for the participant group than for the comparison group in the semester studied. Though not statistically significant, participants avoided academic suspension at the end of the semester at a higher rate than comparison group members did; participants increased their GPAs in the semester studied more than comparison group members did, and participants eventually graduated at a higher rate than comparison group members did. Persistence to the next semester, graduation rates, and GPA gains are all retention measures commonly

examined in the assessment of retention programs. Examining these multiple measures reveals a more positive trend than can be seen using any one of the measures of student retention by itself.

Taken together, the measures of student progress and retention in this study suggest that the Goal Planning Program helped the students who participated in it. The leadership at HCT will decide whether the findings are strong enough, however, for the continued investment of time, money, and energy in the GPP.

Discussion

Factors Influencing Outcomes

In this study, a few factors may have influenced the outcomes. First, the characteristics of the students and the institution studied were markedly different from the populations Reiff (1997) and Gibbon (2000) studied. Participants' ages and the nature of the population at a two-year, commuter college, as opposed to a four-year, liberal arts college seems to impacted the outcomes in the study. Another factor that may have influenced the outcomes was the degree to which the individual advisors in the study put effort into working with the participants in the study. It would be impossible to know if some students would have done better if they had worked with one or the other of the advisors, or whether both advisors were equally enthusiastic about helping students with personal problems or communication issues with faculty. Clearly, the choice of staff who work in this type of program is critical because the staff must be people who welcome student relationships, and whom students would want to form connections with.

Theoretical Implications

Though this study did not provide the confirmation of the results of Reiff's and Gibbon's studies, it did contribute to the understanding of the differences between traditional and nontraditional aged students, commuter and residential campuses, and the issues a college has little control over that can affect student persistence. The findings in this study also suggest the need to measure the success of retention programs with multiple measures, and especially to track student progress to graduation.

The findings in this study also underscore the need for better understanding of the particular retention threats to nontraditional students. Colleges have responded well, in general, to providing on-campus services that help prevent traditional college aged students from dropping out. Over the past twenty years residential campuses have experienced a growth in student services such as counseling, health services, advising, and student life that have been put in place both to attract and retain traditional aged students. More research is needed to understand what types of services and supports nontraditional aged and commuter students would benefit from.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study suggest that students on academic probation can be helped to avoid dismissal from HCT through their participation in the GPP. The strongest implication is that students who participate in the GPP will be more likely to graduate from their program of study than if they do not. Practically then, if the GPP helps students persist to graduation, students should be urged to participate.

Retention of students in college has practical economic implications for both students and colleges. For example, as recently as in 1998, men ages twenty-five and older with one to three years of college had a median annual income of $36,393, college graduates with an associate degree made $40,274, and college graduates with a baccalaureate level degree of the same age group reported a median annual income of $51,405 (Digest of Education Statistics, 1999, Table 386). Institutions that are tuition-driven are impacted immediately when enrollments or completion rates decline. They lose new tuition when students do not choose to attend for the first time, and also when students drop out of school before completion of their degrees. Persistence to degree completion is in the best interests of both the student and the institution for very practical reasons.

Because of the weak indications of the success of the GPP immediately in the semester in which students participated, it is possible that an institution's time, energy, and money are best spent earlier in the students' enrollment at the institution. Waiting until students had failing grades was too late for many participants in the study. If the same practices used in the GPP, such as making early connections with campus resources, regular access to advising, learning important study strategies, and setting attainable academic goals, are put in place for students early in their enrollment, possibly more students can be prevented from being placed on academic probation at all. Then, for those few who are placed on probation despite the early interventions, the GPP may be the specific assistance they need.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study were anticipated and minimized as much as possible. However, the reader is cautioned to consider them as barriers to the generalization of the results of this study to other populations.

1. The researcher's involvement in the Goal Planning Program. The researcher in this study was one of the two advisors students in the study could meet with to participate in the program. She met with 20 of the 34 students who participated in the Goal Planning Program as they worked through the semester. The two advisors met regularly to ensure as much as is possible that they were conducting the elements of the program in the same way. Comparisons of notes from student meetings and products of student record keeping were consistent to the satisfaction of the two advisors and the Assistant Dean for Student Services, who acted as an objective third party. The researcher had no involvement with assigning grades for any courses the participants or comparison group took.

2. The voluntary nature of student participation in the GPP. Little is known about why some students chose to participate and others chose not to. The impact of the volunteer sample is not known.

3. The small number of students who participated in this study makes it difficult to generalize to other colleges.

4. Differences in the demographics of the study groups from Reiff's (1997) and Gibbon's (2000) studies. While Reiff and Gibbon both studied groups at four-year liberal arts colleges, with predominantly traditional aged college students, this study's

population consisted of a population with an average age of 27.6 years, enrolled at a two-year technical college.

Conclusions

The findings in this study provide answers to the research questions posed initially by this researcher. Each is addressed here specifically, with a summary of the conclusions to follow.

1. Did the Goal Planning Program (GPP) have a positive effect on grades and persistence to the next semester of the students who participated in it? There was no statistically significant relationship shown between participation in the GPP and students' mean grades. What was shown was several measures that, when taken together, suggest a positive trend associated with participation in the GPP. Participants avoided academic suspension at the end of the semester at a higher rate than comparison group members did; participants increased their GPAs in the semester studied more than comparison group members did, and participants eventually graduated at a higher rate than comparison group members did. The first two of these three findings directly address this research question. The statistically significant relationship found between participation in the GPP and graduation from an academic program suggests that persistence was enhanced, but not in the short-term measure of semester-to-semester that was posed in the question.

2. Did the students who participated in the GPP improve their grades more and persist to graduation at a higher rate than the students on academic probation who did not participate in the program? The answer to this question is yes. The findings suggest that

there was a statistically significant difference in graduation rates between the participant group and the comparison group in the study. Seven participants graduated in three years and only one of the comparison group members graduated in the same time. The relationship between better grades and participation in the GPP was not statistically significant, though the mean GPA of the participant group increased .194 grade points and the comparison group's GPA increased only .096 grade points. The difference in GPA was not significant, however over the long term; grades and persistence to graduation were stronger than in the comparison group.

More is now known about the Goal Planning Program at the Helena College of Technology from the results of this study. Though fewer than half of the students who participated avoided dismissal (38%) at the end of the semester of the GPP, only 19% of the students who did not participate but were on academic probation at the same time were able to proceed to their next semester of study. Extending this merely positive association with participation in the GPP on to graduation, it was found that seven (21%) of the original participants graduated within three years of enrollment. Since graduation is the ultimate goal of a college such as HCT for its students, this finding truly supports not only the GPP, but also the mission of the college.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings in this study, the primary recommendation of this researcher to the leadership of the Helena College of Technology to continue to support the operation of the Goal Planning Program for academic probationary students. Secondarily, this researcher also recommends that the college institute interventions

similar to the Goal Planning Program early in its students' enrollment. Waiting until students are on probation for intervention may have been too late for many students in the study. The processes and techniques employed in the Goal Planning Program are generally good student practices of setting goals, learning to study effectively, using campus resources effectively, and connecting with a mentor or other significant person associated with college life. These techniques, since they were developed using successful student practices as guidelines, may help students early in their enrollment as well as, or better than after a semester of failure. And finally, once students are placed on academic probation, the researcher recommends that they all be required to participate in the GPP as a condition of their probation.

Further Research

Assessment of the influence the Goal Planning Program at HCT had with students was a first step toward understanding the needs of students on academic probation at HCT. Further research could be done with the GPP at HCT with a few changes that may make a difference in the results. First, changing participation in the GPP from voluntary to mandatory for students on academic probation would yield a clearer picture of the program's effectiveness. Next, replication of the GPP at colleges similar to HCT may provide more comparable populations. A third recommendation is for more research in general targeting retention of adult students, the two-year college environment, and early intervention programs that prevent students in two-year colleges from being placed on academic probation.

Chapter Summary

The problem addressed by this study was that the leadership at the Helena College of Technology did not know whether students on academic probation were helped through their participation in the Goal Planning Program or not. Understanding the impact the GPP may have on participants would help the leadership make decisions about the continued support of the program. The findings of the study suggest that students who participated were more likely to persist to graduation than those students who did not participate. The shorter-term measures of semester-to-semester retention were not as strong, so make the decision of support for the GPP less clear. Ultimately, completion of an academic program is in the best interests of both students and the institution. If the GPP seemed to make graduation more likely for students, it may be an indication that the program has a place in an institutional retention plan. With the findings of this study, the leadership at HCT has a better understanding of the potential place the GPP has in an institutional retention plan, so can make a more informed decision.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

ACADEMIC PROBATION LETTER

January 3, 2001

Dear :

The Registrar's Office of The Helena College of Technology (HCT) has completed the grade audit for the semester of Fall 2000. Your transcript shows that you achieved less than a 2.0 Grade Point Average. Academic policy at HCT requires that students receiving less than a 2.0 GPA be placed on scholastic probation for the next regular semester attended. Therefore, your academic standing for the semester of Spring 2001 is *scholastic probation*.

You must earn at least a 2.0 during the semester of Spring 2001 in order to continue attendance at HCT. If you do not earn a 2.0 GPA, you will be suspended for a semester before being considered for readmission. Please check the Scholastic Requirements section of your HCT catalog for more details on this policy.

You will be receiving information on a new program at the College, the Goal Planning Program, which has been proven to be successful at other colleges in helping students at academic risk (i.e. scholastic probation). Your required participation in this program will allow you to use the resources available at HCT to improve your academic standing.

Your advisor has bee notified of your scholastic standing. Please keep him/her informed of any academic problems you encounter or of any assistance you may need.

If you have any questions regarding the content of this letter, please call me at 444-6800.

Sincerely,

Lee Suttorp
Student Services

APPENDIX B

GOAL PLANNING TOOLS

HELENA COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY
LEARNING CENTER
CONTRACT FOR GOAL PLANNING PROGRAM

Last semester, your earned semester Grade Point Average put you on Academic Probation. Academic Probation means that you will be dismissed at the end of fall semester if you do not reach the grade objectives stated in the college catalog. Assistant Dean Myrna Doney has recommended that you participate in the Goal Planning Program (GPP) and has asked for periodic updates on your progress.

The components of the GPP are:

1. Previous semester evaluation
2. Study skills training
3. Long and short term goal setting
4. Present semester grade tracking
5. Weekly appointments

The GPP has helped college students at other colleges, in fact, 60% of the students who participated in the program showed an increase in their Grade Point Average. The students were successful because they ***actively*** participated and demonstrated a desire to succeed. It is important to keep in mind that this program is designed to help you take charge of your academic future. ***You*** are the key element.

Signing below indicates your understanding of the components of the GPP and your intention to diligently participate.

_____ _____

Signature Date

_____

Printed name

HELENA COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY
LEARNING CENTER
SEMESTER ASSESSMENT

Overall Reaction: _____

_____

_____

_____

What was good about last semester? _____

_____

_____

_____

What was bad about last semester? _____

_____

_____

_____

In what ways can I improve? _____

_____

_____

_____

In what ways have I been successful? _____

_____

_____

_____

Outlook: _____

_____

_____

_____

Today's date: _____ Name: _____

HELENA COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY
LEARNING CENTER
GOAL PLANNING PROGRAM

Name:_____ Date: _____

Semester: FALL SPRING SUMMER 200___

Number of semesters completed: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Address: _____ Phone: _____

Program: _____ Advisor: _____

Purpose (Why am I at HCT right now?):

_____

_____

Goals:

1. Personal: _____

_____

2. GPA: _____

Anticipated: _____

Required by contract: _____

Individual Course Objectives:

	Instructor	Course	Grade Objective	Study Time	Strengths to meet grade objective	Obstacles to meet grade objective
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						

HCT Learning Center
Grade Calculator

Course: _____ **Instructor:** _____

Scale: _____pts/% = A _____pts/% = B _____pts/% = C _____pts/% = D

Date	Item	Pts	Possible Pts	%	Letter Grade	Cum. Pts	Cum. %	Cum. Grade	Absent Dates
						/			
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