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Identifying Key Success Indicators in Student Letters for Reinstatement from Suspension

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Identifying Key Success Indicators in Student Letters for Reinstatement from Suspension

Abstract

Retaining and graduating students continues to be an issue that higher education institutions are longing to solve, especially for the growing non-traditional student body whose list of competing priorities continues to grow. As academic suspension hinders persistence, this article examines a key aspect of the reinstatement from suspension process for students: the letter of appeal. The narrative provided is impacted by how the writer expresses their acknowledgment of what went wrong and what changes will be made to ensure administrators of future success, it too is impacted by the interpretation of the institutional decision maker. By reviewing a sample of reinstatement letters, the researchers sought to identify themes in successfully reinstated letters for adult and diverse students who were suspended from a mid-sized urban university. Barriers to success, changes made, self-efficacy and locus of control, and success plans were noted as key themes in both reinstated and non-reinstated letters supported by empirical research for these student populations. The research found that students who provided more details or context around their initial suspension were more successful in their reinstatement attempt.

Keywords

reinstatement letters, non-traditional students, critical personal narrative, success indicators, completion rates, retention, academic suspension

Author Bio

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Introduction

Institutions of higher education have been concerned with supporting and retaining increasing numbers of adult and diverse, or non-traditional, students for several decades. Conducting research on this topic in the mid-1980s, Bean and Metzner (1985, 1987) developed a conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition that attempted to address why, “In spite of the spectacular growth in nontraditional student enrollments, the likelihood of nontraditional students finishing a degree program is much less than for traditional students” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 487). Their conceptual model brought together research that had been conducted to that point on the attrition of nontraditional students. The model has served as a starting place for other research to better understand why persistence levels are lower for diverse and adult learners.

Despite their model, continued research has struggled to identify how to best retain and ensure non-traditional student persistence toward degree completion. Much research has identified reasons why adult and diverse student populations might not be successful in reaching a degree as discussed in the literature review below (Tinto, 1975; Isaak et al., 2006; Munt & Merydith, 2012). However, attempting to identify success characteristics for a group of students so broadly defined may be like chasing rainbows – elusive and unrealistic – as each student’s identities, experiences, beliefs, and values are unique and may not easily be categorized. How individual students’ characteristics intersect may also impact how they approach their education and will surely be different for each student.

Academic Suspension

Academic suspension impedes progress toward degree completion. Students who are academically suspended return and complete degree programs at lower rates than students who

remain in good academic standing. In their research published in 2003, Goldman et al., found that only 6.2% of suspended students returned and successfully completed a degree. Of those suspended, students of color were suspended at more than double the percentage of White students (18.8% vs. 8.2%) but were more likely to return and graduate than their White counterparts (24.7% vs. 16.7%). However, little research has sought to completely understand this phenomenon.

Academic suspension results from students not meeting satisfactory academic progress thresholds as defined by an institution. Students who are suspended are often required to stop-out of their academic programs for a period of time (e.g., one term, an academic year, etc.). When students believe they are ready to return after their time out, they need to submit a letter of appeal to their school/college to be considered for reinstatement. Some instructions or writing prompts may be provided to the student to give guidance on what to include in their letter. For example, prompts may ask students to recount what happened that led to their suspension, what has changed since they were suspended, and how they plan to be successful moving forward. The reinstatement letter of appeal is, then, a vehicle for the student to explain their background and experiences, and how they are making meaning of their academic suspension.

Student background and experience will inform how a student drafts their reinstatement letter of appeal. Different groups, defined by age, culture, race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and gender, tell stories differently. While narrative structure is linear in nature from a Western view of temporality (Langellier, 1989), other cultures or groups may not follow that same structure, telling stories in a circular, non-linear, or indirect fashion. In researching how cultural differences in storytelling could impact students in the classroom, Taylor and Matsuda (1988) found that stories “can become a source of misunderstanding and miscommunication

leading to discrimination because of lack of cultural sensitivity to cultural differences” (p. 209). Therefore, it is important to consider how one’s background impacts their ability to tell a ‘good’ story, and perhaps most importantly, how that story may be interpreted when a student’s academic degree progress is at stake.

Defining the Diverse and Adult Student Population

The term non-traditional has long been used to define a student population that essentially comprises a smaller portion of the overall student population. Traditional students are typically defined as 18-24, to include recent high school graduates and some delayed entry students, majority White, and usually living on campus. According to Bean and Metzner (1985):

A nontraditional student is older than 24, or does not live in a campus residence (e.g., is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and is chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (especially courses, certification, and degrees).
(p. 489)

The term was later expanded to include first-generation students. This very definition can also be viewed as one that highlights risk-factors for academic attrition (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Non-traditional has also referred to students from non-traditional backgrounds, to include “age, colour [sic], ethnicity, gender, national origin, physical, mental and emotional ability, race, religion, language, sexual orientation and socio-economic status” (Taylor & House, 2010, p. 46). The term post-traditional has also been used to encompass a similar wide range of students, including those aged 25 and older with varying levels of academic preparedness, who may be single-parents or veterans, have diverse ethnic backgrounds, may be immigrants, or are students looking for a second chance (Soares, 2013).

The broad definitions of non-traditional or post-traditional students makes it difficult to track this student population's total enrollment compared to traditional students. However, Soares et al. (2017) found that students over the age of 25, working full-time, financially independent, or connected to the military comprised nearly 60% of the student population in 2011-12. More recently the National Center for Education Statistics projected nearly 40% of students will attend institutions of higher education on a part-time basis by 2028 (Hussar & Baily, 2020). Thus, students comprising the broad definition of non-traditional are becoming the majority population of students on today's campuses.

Completion and Retention Issues for Diverse and Adult Student Populations

The increase in a diverse, adult student population requires institutions of higher education to reconsider institutional norms previously determined for a more traditional student population. Completion rates for this population of students are historically much lower than those of their traditional student counterparts. Though, some trends are changing. In a report for the National Student Clearinghouse, Causey et al. (2020) found that "Delayed entry students (ages 21 to 24) and older students (age 25 and older) improved by 1.1 and 2.7 percentage points to a 46.2 percent and 48.4 percent completion rate, respectively" (p. 5). This improvement, however, is couched in the fact that traditional student completion rates are plateauing. The report found that, for students starting at public four-year institutions, Black student completion rates increased and surpassed that of White students, 1.0 % versus .5%. Black adult students made further gains with a 2.2% increase in completion. The Lumina Foundation (2019), looking at this from the point of view of stop-outs, found that "While Black and Hispanic students are more likely to stop out than [W]hite students, the majority of college stop-outs are [W]hite" (p. 4). This was confirmed by Causey et al. (2020) who cited Black students as having the sharpest

decrease in stop-out rates compared to all other groups, and Black men making the largest gains with regard to retention. These positive trends for diverse, adult student populations further highlight the need for colleges and universities to consider the needs of this student population to continue to improve their retention.

Known Barriers to Success for Diverse and Adult Student Populations

Understanding why students from diverse and adult student populations have higher attrition rates than traditional students has long been the focus of research, as was highlighted in Bean and Metzner's 1985 conceptual model. Their model and following research identified some key characteristics generally understood as risk factors to academic success for these students. For example, in Bean and Metzner's 1985 conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition, they found that environmental variables, such as finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer, played a significant role in student continuous enrollment. More recent research has highlighted that older students tend to express more academic than social concerns compared to their traditional-aged counterparts. Namely, adult students are found to be more concerned about staff and faculty interactions, how much coursework would be required, whether they are capable to complete the work, and whether they can be successful (Taylor & House, 2010). Finances and managing work/life balance were the two other categories of concerns expressed by students. The Lumina Foundation (2019) found that difficulty balancing school and work at the same time was the most common reason for adult learners to stop out. Affordability, flexibility, interest, and relevance were additional concerns that impacted adult student persistence (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Having poor motivation, lack of self-direction, and/or poor relationships could all inhibit academic success (Comings, 2007). Negative perceptions of past educational experiences

(Cubeta et al., 2001) were also identified as a reason that diverse, adult students may not be retained.

Success Indicators

While much is known about why students don't persist, researchers and institutions are still trying to understand what factors positively impact student success, especially for their more diverse and adult student populations. Padilla (1999) wrote that:

While it is necessary to understand why some students fail to complete their programs of study so that students and institutions can be told what to avoid, it is crucial to understand what accounts for students' success when they do complete a degree program so that students and institutions can be told what to do. (p. 132)

Cubeta et al. (2001) also noted:

Faced with increasing age, ethnic, and racial diversity among students, postsecondary institutions are searching for additional ways to identify and address areas that may impede students' success (areas of risk) while also assessing and building on areas that could enhance their success (areas of promise). (p. 296)

The diversity of the student population adds to the complexity of identifying success indicators. There are no simple metrics, like high school GPA (Grade Point Average), or number of credits completed, that could truly predict a student's future success when life intercedes. In some cases, the same characteristics that could cause a student to stop-out may also have positive influences on student persistence. Family and work responsibilities may take priority over school, and they may be the reason why students seek to continue their education. However, some research is starting to highlight key factors that could indicate whether a student will ultimately be successful in completing their academic program. The researchers organized these key factors

into the following categories: Academic and Social Support Systems, Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control, and Success Planning.

Academic and Social Support Systems

A key component of Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition is social support. Specifically, they found that "Students who are encouraged to remain in school by family and employers will probably do so despite poor academic advising or uncertainty of major" (p. 492). This was later confirmed by Lundberg et al. (2008) who stated that "Social support appears to be one vital factor for adult learners because it can increase goal commitment and student success" (p. 58). Families play a key role in student success. Being married may be an incentive to persist (Santa Rita, 1998) and having small children is more likely to negatively impact success or persistence, whereas having older children may improve persistence (Comings, 2007).

In another research article focused specifically on supporting students returning from suspension, Berkovitz and O'Quin (2006) postulated that mentoring and social support provided through an intervention program helped women and minority students be successful by identifying and addressing underlying attributes that were found to cause these groups to be less successful. They determined that their findings "suggest that these programs can have a lasting and positive effect on persistence. Academic and social support systems are vital in assisting at-risk students" (Berkovitz & O'Quin, 2006, p. 211). Cubeta et al. (2001) found that help-seeking and utilizing academic support resources like tutoring had an even greater impact on Black students than their White counterparts. The authors found that "successful students, unlike their less successful cohorts, perceive[d] the environment at their college to be more tolerant of

diversity” (p. 306). Therefore, students who did not feel they had support on campus because of their identity were less likely to succeed.

Drake (2011) linked academic advising as a key retention tool, especially where it supported students’ connection to campus resources and staff/faculty, improving their understanding of the academic program and requirements, and helping students stay motivated through establishing goals and mentoring. Good academic advising “helps students to value the learning process, to apply decision-making strategies, to put the college experience into perspective, to set priorities and evaluate events, to develop thinking and learning skills, to make choices, and to value the learning process” (p. 10). Research completed by Cubeta et al. (2001) suggested that student services, like advising, “could increase measures of academic success for students ... by focusing interventions on increasing academic self-efficacy, motivation, help-seeking behaviors, locus of control, and on removing deterrents to participation” (p. 303). When considering success after return from suspension, Berkovitz and O’Quin (2006) found that in the intervention program they researched, success rates increased where individual counselors helped students “locate assistance, understand college rules and regulations, and guide them through the college maze” (p. 211).

Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control

Cubeta et al. (2001) found that “Academic self-efficacy was the single most powerful predictor” for successful academic performance (p. 301). Self-efficacy was found to have an even greater impact on student success for Black students (12% versus 8%) versus their White counterparts. Comings (2007) defined self-efficacy as “focused on a specific set of tasks and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that set of tasks” or more straightforward as “a feeling that they can reach their goals” (p. 35). Both Cubeta et al. (2001) and Comings (2007)

arrived at the conclusion that improving a student's sense of self-efficacy is one of the keys to student success. Further, adult learners who are more self-directed and have more developed autonomous (intrinsic) motivation positively impacts self-efficacy, use of learning strategies, and overall persistence (Rothes et al., 2017).

Motivation. Motivation is a key factor that can both hinder and support student persistence. Lack of motivation, or externally focused motivators, often play a role in student attrition. Whereas having clear motivations, including more intrinsic motivators, can positively impact student success. Rothes et al. (2017), citing Knowles (1980), noted that “Empirical results concerning adult learners’ motivation are consistent with foundational adult education models like andragogy and self-directed learning that assume adults to be purposeful, self-directed learners, led by internal rather than external factors” (p. 7). However, while Rothes et al. (2017) found that intrinsic motivation is positively related to academic success, external motivation when combined with some aspect of intrinsic motivation was not necessarily negative. “Autonomous [intrinsic] motivation can be promoted by helping adults grasp the meaning of education and its relation to their other goals and values, as well as by providing learners with a sense of choice and volition [external]” (Rothes et al., 2017, p. 17).

Rothes et al. (2017) also found that encouraging students to engage in deep-learning strategies like critical thinking, understanding their own learning processes, and connecting learning to previous experience as well as new understandings, can improve students’ self-concept and self-efficacy, which further improves student motivation. This is supported by Comings, (2007) especially when students engaged in self-study or prior learning. “Attempts at self-study may be an indication of strong motivation, or some people may need several attempts at learning before they are ready to persist” (Comings, 2007, p. 33).

Self-Determination. Self-determination is one more catchall of student success, encompassing personal responsibility (Comings, 2007) or locus of control (Cubeta et al., 2001). Self-determination encapsulates how students exhibit control over their own academic success and own their decisions and behaviors that can impede that success. Students who take responsibility for their actions, and do not place blame on others for their failings, are more likely to honestly assess their shortcomings, know where they need to seek additional support, and express greater self-advocacy to get the support they need. Chen (2014) described the sense of personal responsibility among adult learners as “They seemed to appreciate that they could be active agents in their lives moving forward. There were ‘other’ ways of thinking that became more appealing as they discovered the consequences of inaction or passivity” (p. 413). Self-Determination Theory provides even more context for consideration. Namely, that Self-Determination Theory focuses on the significant effect of socio-cultural contexts. When those contexts satisfy one’s competence, autonomous, and relatedness needs, the contexts also play a role in the encouragement or facilitation of one’s motivation and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, self-determination both involves and impacts goal setting and motivation, but also how the student feels about themselves in the process.

Success Planning

Padilla (1999) discovered that successful students learn how to navigate and overcome barriers to degree completion either through knowledge acquired prior to arriving on campus, applying a perspective that the struggle is worth the necessary work to persist, or by strategically applying knowledge gained on how to best overcome barriers. Padilla found that actions taken by successful students generally fell into three categories: 1) building a support base (academic and social support systems), 2) developing independence (self-efficacy and locus of control), and

3) developing a plan that utilizes their obtained knowledge to successfully overcome any remaining barriers (p. 143). These findings essentially describe success planning where students intentionally engage in actions that enable them to overcome barriers and successfully complete their degree program.

Goal Setting. Goal setting can be a significant component of student success planning. Goal setting can help motivate students to enroll and engage, as well as sustain motivation when revisited throughout their programs. Comings (2007) cited previous research that supported student goal setting as related to persistence and found through their research two key steps to support adult student persistence, which includes establishing goals that connect to student motivations for learning and, second, developing a learning plan that incorporates course taking and support resources essential to supporting students meet their goals.

Conceptual Framework

The written letter of appeal is the most common requirement within the reinstatement process, becoming a piece of *critical personal narrative*. Critical personal narrative is defined by Chapman (2004) as narrative that addresses power and knowledge, while also being intimately personal “often embarrassingly and deliberately so, even though the very intimate nature of personal writing and the visceral reactions it elicits can be both a strength and a weakness” (p. 98). Chapman goes on to say that critical personal narrative “seeks to make this personal experience useful politically” using story consciously to satisfy “the human need for story” (p. 98). Writing critical personal narrative is not easy. When seen as a method for describing and interpreting personal experience, beliefs, or values, critical personal narrative is akin to autoethnography. Ellis stated that this type of narrative is:

certainly not something most people can do well...The self-questioning [that] autoethnography demands is extremely difficult...honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts—and emotional pain...the vulnerability of revealing yourself, and not being able to take back what you’ve written, or having any control over how readers interpret it. It can be humiliating. (as cited in Chapman, 2004, p. 99)

Yet, this is exactly what is asked of students in the reinstatement appeal letter. When reinstatement decisions are being made, the reader of the narrative interprets how the student told their story, making their own sense of the sequence or corroborating events, and inferring narrative fidelity.

Langellier (1989) argued that narratives provide an evaluative framework of both the storyteller and the story being told. Chapman (2004) described narrative as “a very large, confused, and confusing umbrella term for a host of different kinds of storying; and it’s also used as a research method for collecting data and for analyzing and representing them” (p. 98). Chapman (2004) further specified critical personal narrative as a genre that involves both power and knowledge in practice. The personal nature of the narrative is evocative where, in the case of reinstatement, students share deeply personal stories that are difficult and embarrassing to disclose but are used politically to convince those with authority that they should be reinstated. Using critical personal narrative to achieve reinstatement, “narrators tell stories of their own experiences as learners...hoping these are resonant with the reader, even as they write their own way to an understanding of particular problems” (Chapman, 2004, p. 99).

Cultural differences appear in narrative – how stories are told, where emphasis is placed on meaning and importance, and even one’s compulsion to share personal details. “Honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts—and emotional pain” (Ellis &

Bochner, 2000, as cited in Chapman, 2004, p. 99). Storytelling in this way creates vulnerability, exposing students' personal strengths and weaknesses, in order to be reinstated. A student's inclination or capacity for that kind of vulnerability may impact whether they are willing to share, or even participate, in the narrative process. From a different perspective, Chapman (2004) found that cultural or personal factors can impact students from speaking up, but the narrative process may be a welcome opportunity for expression. Yet, Walter Fisher (1989) describes narrative as a "universal cultural activity," where:

narrative is meaningful for persons in particular and in general, across communities as well as cultures, across time and place. Narratives enable us to understand the actions of others 'because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives.' (MacIntyre, 1983, as cited in Fisher, 1989, pp. 65-66)

Fisher (1989) further argued that good narrative follows the logic of good reasons, or narrative rationality. Narrative rationality:

Focuses on all forms of human communication as carriers of good reasons and on a system of evaluation that incorporates the available standards of argumentative assessment but offers additional considerations...it will always be a story, an interpretation of some aspect of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality. (pp. 48-49)

Whereas traditional rationality is normative and provides a hierarchical system, "narrative rationality is, on the other hand, descriptive; it offers an account, an understanding, of an instance of human choice and action" (Fisher, 1989, p. 66). The narrative provides a venue for students to explain, and administrators of the reinstatement process to understand, a student's

own assessment of their educational experience. It also affords administrators the opportunity to interpret from the narrative key factors that could impact that student's success upon return.

Hermeneutic Theory

To further explore the importance of narrative, especially regarding reinstatement, one needs to understand that it is not just the student telling their story, but the reader's interpretation of that story that leads to a reinstatement decision. Champlin-Scharff (2010) explains this process using hermeneutic theory. She noted:

hermeneutic theory is an ongoing process involving a subjective rather than objective encounter with the individual. Through hermeneutic theory, one does not aim to uncover a definitive conceptualization of the advisee, but seeks, on a continual basis, to understand and interpret how advisees find significance and make meaning in the world within which they exist over time. (Champlin-Scharff, 2010, p. 59)

Trying to understand what education means to a particular student is not achievable through objective analysis of key data points. Instead, "meaning is interpretation determined by the significance something has for an individual human being" (Champlin-Scharff & Hagen, 2013, p. 226). Chapman (2004) supported this in how she uses critical personal narrative in the classroom setting, emphasizing that what she looks for in the student narrative "is the way they use the story to make sense of their practice or of the educational issues that are important to them" (Chapman, 2004, p. 100).

How key factors show up in student narrative, and ultimately how they are interpreted, can impact whether a student is permitted reinstatement. Aspects of support systems may show up in how students represent their relationships in their narratives, or how students discuss the connections they have that may influence the value they assign to their academic study

(Champlin-Scharff, 2010). Whether students explicitly discuss their motivation to return and the goals they have set for their return or the level of responsibility they take for their previous failures will be scrutinized by administrators of the reinstatement process who, undoubtedly, will be seeking a ‘logic of good reasons’ to support their reinstatement decision.

Summary and Research Questions

Research is still emerging in attempt to pinpoint and understand the factors that lead to student success, especially for adult and diverse learners. How students interact with or perceive the quality of their academic advising, their level and quality of motivation, whether students set clear, attainable goals, their level of self-efficacy, the quality of their support systems, and the extent that students take responsibility for their actions are aspects found to be common among students who have been successful and are highlighted in the literature reviewed. However, it is acknowledged that factors impacting success will vary from student to student depending on their own experiences and their ability to make meaning of their education.

In the reinstatement from suspension process, students are asked to explain what led to them being unsuccessful, what has changed, what steps they will take and support they will engage with going forward to ensure their success. Within this narrative, students are given an opportunity to tell their story, to show how they are making meaning of their education and do so persuasively in order to achieve reinstatement. Further, how administrators interpret the student narrative provided in the reinstatement letter of appeal plays an important role in students’ progress toward degree. Where objective student record data may not provide a recipe for success, the literature supports that the recipe may be best found within the student narrative. This raised the question, “Can themes identified in the letters of appeal help administrators make more informed reinstatement from suspension decisions?” Or, otherwise stated, “Do themes

present in letters of appeal lead to more positive reinstatement decisions?” The main goals of this research were to identify themes in reinstatement appeal letters to determine if specific themes matched what the literature review found was critical to successful reinstatement and to determine if specific themes were more prevalent than others in letters that resulted in reinstatement versus letters that did not.

Methodology

This qualitative research study reviewed letters of appeal for reinstatement from suspension utilizing the framework of narrative theory. Data for this study came from a convenience sample of 21 letters submitted to a college serving a diverse population of undergraduate students within a mid-sized public university. The institution required students to sit out for three semesters before being eligible to return and enroll in classes. Appeal letters ranged in length from one paragraph to three pages. Personal identifying information was redacted, although some corresponding demographic information was provided to the researchers by the college’s Satisfactory Academic Progress committee chair. Institutional Review Board approval was sought and approved as exempt since no student identifying information was used in this research.

Fifteen of the letters reviewed resulted in successful reinstatement, and six were denied reinstatement. Demographically the students whose letters were reviewed (including both reinstated and non-reinstated) were mostly Black/African American (13), then Asian (4), White (3), and Hispanic (1). Five of the students were identified as immigrants to the United States through the institution's student record data system. Information further gleaned from the letters suggests that several more students, though United States citizens, were first generation Americans. As the students identified themselves in their letters, there were 13 men, 5 women,

and 3 students whose gender was not clearly identified. Marital status was not provided by the institution to the researchers, however four students identified themselves as married in their letters. The average age of those reinstated was 29, with a range of 22 to 38. The average age for non-reinstated was slightly older at 31, with a range of 26-35. Therefore, the student letters reviewed closely represented a diverse, non-traditional student population.

The researchers began by examining the letters that resulted in reinstatement, reading and coding each letter inductively, identifying codes as they emerged through initial and subsequent readings. To establish reliability through ‘intercoder agreement’ (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 264), the researchers compared, categorized, and sorted the codes into agreed upon themes which aligned well with some of the key takeaways from the literature as described above. First round coding included capturing inductive codes with their respective statements. The researchers compared their notes and agreed to codes and statements identified. Several rounds of subsequent coding led to subcategorization of codes, organization of codes into themes, and identifying codes and themes by impact. Non-reinstated letters were then reviewed using the key codes and themes identified from the reinstated letters for comparison.

Results

The initial round of coding identified 38 inductive codes, which were then grouped by similarity and meaning (Table 1). For example, *finding balance*, *identifying a graduation term*, or *promising to do better* were all aligned with the code *goals*. Codes were also organized by their positive, negative, or neutral impact on student success as determined by the researchers when reading the letters. This grouping created a more manageable key code list which was then reviewed and sorted by theme and impact.

Identifying Key Codes

Table 1

Counts of Initial Codes/Sub-Codes in Reinstated Letters

Code w/Sub-Codes	Count of Code/Sub-Code
Family	36
Goals	34
Balance	1
Grad term	6
Promise to do better	9
Self-determination	33
Does not want to be defined by failure	3
Motivation	4
Proof can do well	8
Second chance	4
Work	32
Military	2
Personal responsibility	31
Lack of control	2
Legal	1
Reflection	1
Support resources	30
Learning partnership	1
Self-efficacy	23
Promise to do better	2

Code w/Sub-Codes	Count of Code/Sub-Code
School fit	8
Time management	22
Balance	6
Study skills	1
Health	15
Mental health	5
Self-care	8
Substance abuse	1
Priorities	11
Reflection	1
Financial	11
Housing	10
Balance	1
Demographic	7
Cultural background	2
First-generation	1
Immigrant	2
International Student	2
Grand Total	295

Family, goals, self-determination, work and personal responsibility were the main topics discussed in the reinstated letters. Family statements included concerns about parenting or sibling-care. Some students noted family expectations about schooling, from pursuing a specific career path to less supportive views of school versus work. Some students discussed moving

with their families and settling into new communities. Work was closely tied to many of the family statements where students discussed needing to financially support their families, pay for rent or mortgages, or support family still living abroad.

Goals, self-determination, and personal responsibility are all closely aligned with students defining what they were and were not in control of, how they planned to be successful, and how they defined success for themselves. Sample statements that highlight these sentiments included: Goals - “plan to read my books, do my homework and prepare for my exams.” Self-determination - “My current GPA doesn't reflect who I am as a student.” Personal responsibility - “Did not utilize my resources and that could have changed the trajectory of my education.”

Non-reinstated letters were then analyzed using the established key codes identified in the initial rounds of reading reinstated letters (Table 2). When compared to the reinstated letters, *goals, personal responsibility, and self-determination* were main topics that appeared with highest frequency in non-reinstated letters. *Time management* also appeared more frequently in non-reinstated letters compared to reinstated letters. Time management statements lent themselves more toward trying to better manage all of a student's responsibilities rather than attempting to minimize those responsibilities to create more time. Students lamented not having enough time, creating better routines, and needing to finish their degree programs as soon as possible.

Based on these key codes, higher incidences of *goals, personal responsibility, self-determination, family, work, and support resources* were more likely to result in reinstatement as compared to the higher incidence of *time management* in non-reinstated letters. It is likely that statements about family, work, personal responsibility, and self-determination in reinstated letters provided more context for administrators upon which to base their decisions.

Table 2*Counts of Codes in Non-Reinstated Letters*

Code	Count of Code
Goals	17
Time management	16
Personal responsibility	12
Self-determination	11
Health	8
Family	8
Work	7
Financial	6
Support Resources	4
Transportation	2
Demographic	2
Grand Total	93

Identifying Themes

Initial codes were then organized by four main themes Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control, Barriers to Success, Success Plan, and Changes Made, in line with the literature review (Table 3).

Table 3*Counts of Initial Codes by Themes from Reinstated Letters*

Codes	Self-Efficacy,	Barriers			Uncategorized	Grand Total
	Locus of Control	to Success	Success Plan	Change s Made		
Family	3	23		9	1	36
Goals	13		21			34
Self-determination	23		1	9		33
Work	3	16	3	9	1	32
Personal responsibility	20	9		2		31
Support resources	2	2	22	4		30
Self-efficacy	17	2	2	2		23
Time management		8	11	3		22
Health		7	2	6		15
Priorities	10	1				11
Financial		4		7		11
Housing		6		4		10
Demographic	1	3			3	7
Grand Total	92	81	62	55	5	295

The theme most identified throughout the reinstated letters was Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control. Students discussed their responsibility in their past struggles and defined what success meant to them in the goals and priorities they were setting for themselves. *Self-determination, personal responsibility, and self-efficacy* were the three top codes under this theme. The main differences between these three codes were how the authors defined them.

Self-determination was defined as more than just a feeling or belief that one could be successful or had a level of competence. It also included internal attitudes around relationships and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Key statements of self-determination included, “I am a good student; having a low grade or withdrawals does not indicate that I am a bad student,” and “Through my experience of hardship, I am determined to strive...continuing my path to empower myself with knowledge.”

Personal responsibility was coded where students made definitive statements of responsibility for their actions. These statements focused mostly on what students stated they could have done differently. Key statements included, “I take full responsibility,” “[I] regret not taking time off from school to help my family settle down,” “Did not utilize my resources and that could have changed the trajectory of my education.”

Comings (2007) definition was *self-efficacy* was used, where self-efficacy is “focused on a specific set of tasks and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that set of tasks,” or more straightforward as “a feeling that they can reach their goals” (p. 35). Key statements of self-efficacy included, “I have established as independence that will allow me to survive and take care of myself and my children regardless of my marital status,” and “I should not hesitate to ask questions during class because it helps me understand a lot better.”

The next most identified theme was Barriers to Success. It is key to note that *family* and *work* were cited as the most common barriers to success and were also a couple of the most likely to be mentioned under the theme Changes Made. Thus, highlighting that family and work can be both risk factors and supporting factors in student success.

Within Success Plan, it seemed appropriate that *goals*, *support resources*, and *time management* were the most coded where students defined their goals for being successful,

described the resources they would utilize to support their success, and provided examples of how they would organize their time more efficiently to accomplish their goals. Key statements included tools students would use to become better organized, like calendars and planners. Some students specified specific resources, like advising and tutoring. Still others focused on their end goals of completing their degrees within a certain timeframe.

The same themes and codes were applied to the non-reinstated letters (Table 4). The researchers found that non-reinstated letters focused mostly on Success Planning and Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control, and less so on Barriers to Success. *Time management* was the most commonly identified concern of students on which most focused their success plan. *Goals* were highlighted across both Success Planning and Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control, where students seemed clear in defining what they wanted (e.g., “I now have a plan for the future, know exactly what goals I want to obtain,” and “plan to get my masters in Social Work”). Within Barriers to Success and Changes Made, most codes appeared only a handful of times and no one code really stood out as a focus among these letters. Thus, students who took responsibility, understood their own strengths or limitations, and focused on their goals and priorities were more likely to be reinstated than those students who focused mostly on time management and less on making changes.

Table 4*Counts of Initial Codes by Themes from Non-Reinstated Letters*

Codes	Self-					Grand Total
	Success Plan	Efficacy, Locus of Control	Barriers to Success	Changes Made	Uncategorized	
Goals	8	8	1			17
Time management	12		2	2		16
Personal responsibility	1	9	2			12
Self-determination	2	5		4		11
Family		2	4	2		8
Health		2	5	1		8
Work			2	5		7
Financial	2		2	2		6
Support Resources	3		1			4
Demographic				1	1	2
Transportation			1	1		2
Grand Total	28	26	20	18	1	93

Identifying Impact on Success

Subsequent review of the initial codes and themes found that there were positive, negative, and neutral aspects of the codes (Tables 5 and 6). Where negative aspects were those that impacted the student's initial ability to be successful, positive aspects were related to students making changes, realizing their goals, strengths, and motivations, and developing

success plans. Neutral aspects were those that the researchers noted but were indeterminate on how they may have impacted the student's success.

Table 5

Impact on Success by Theme and Code Count in Reinstated Letters

Theme by Impact	Count of Code
Negative	96
Barriers to Success	80
Changes Made	1
Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control	15
Neutral	21
Barriers to Success	1
Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control	15
Success Plan	1
Uncategorized	4
Positive	178
Changes Made	54
Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control	62
Success Plan	61
Uncategorized	1
Grand Total	295

Students focused significantly on positive aspects of their success plans, goals, motivations, and changes made. Positive impacts were identified at nearly twice the rate of negative impacts (178 (60%) vs. 96 (33%)) in reinstated from suspension letters. Non-reinstated letters showed a similar distribution among impacts with 56 being positive (60%) and 31 (33%) being negative (Table 6).

Table 6

Impact on Success by Theme and Code Count in Non-Reinstated Letters

Theme by Impact	Count of Code
Negative	31
Barriers to Success	20
Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control	7
Success Plan	4
Neutral	6
Changes Made	2
Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control	3
Uncategorized	1
Positive	56
Changes Made	16
Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control	16
Success Plan	24
Grand Total	93

One key difference noted between the negative impacts of reinstated letters to non-

reinstated letters is the focus on Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control. In reinstated letters, students focused more on what they did and did not have control over, whereas in non-reinstated letters, students focused on what did not work in their success planning. Key statements in the non-reinstated letters provided vague promises, inappropriate assessments of time needed, or timelines to completion that seemed unrealistic. Despite this difference, the rate of positive, negative, and neutral impacts being the same across reinstated and non-reinstated letters suggests that impact on success is not a valid basis for administrators making reinstatement decisions.

Discussion

Review of the letters submitted for reinstatement largely aligned with the literature review. The identified barriers to success as discussed in these letters were predominantly family and/or work related as supported by Bean and Metzner (1985). Students described family responsibilities taking precedent over school, helping family members newly immigrated, taking care of siblings or parents, caring for small children. Many family concerns were tied to work where students needed to help provide for their families, cover rent or mortgage payments, and other general expenses. Extended work hours or multiple jobs also impeded student success. These findings were supported by the Lumina Foundation (2019) who found school/work balance was the most common reason for adult students to stop persisting in college. While the results show a similar distribution between positive and negative impacts, the researchers found that more information or details were provided in reinstated letters versus non-reinstated letters regarding barriers to success. This suggests that successful reinstated students provided more intimate personal information about what had happened leading to their initial suspension akin to critical personal narrative (Chapman, 2004).

As was reflected in the literature review, aspects of Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control were strongly evident in all letters submitted for reinstatement. The rate of *self-efficacy* noted in reinstated letters was slightly higher at 10% versus 7% for non-reinstated letters. *Goals, self-determination, self-efficacy, personal responsibility, and priorities* were all aspects of Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control that occurred frequently in reinstated letters. The researchers expected to find some aspect of students not taking responsibility for what happened or placing blame elsewhere for their inability to be successful. In total, only two statements were identified that lent themselves to this frame of thinking including a general statement about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and that the “phenomena of life are uncontrollable.” Both statements were from the same letter for a student that was successfully reinstated. Thus, the interpretation (Champlin-Scharff, 2010; Champlin-Scharff & Hagen, 2013) suggests that students at the point of appealing for reinstatement understand their role in what occurred that led to their academic suspension and are willing to accept responsibility for that role.

The higher rate of positive over negative impacts was also surprising. Assumptions that returning students play the victim role or hope to gain the reader’s sympathy was not at all evident in these letters. Both reinstated and non-reinstated letters focused most on the positive changes students were making in order to come back and be successful, as well as the positive aspects of accepting responsibility, taking control, defining goals, and putting together a plan to support their academic success. Many of the letters made statements about reflecting upon or realizing what education meant for them (Chapman, 2004) and defining what that success looked like (Champlin-Scharff & Hagen, 2013), either through completing a specific degree program or working toward a specific career goal (Comings, 2007).

Perhaps the biggest difference between reinstated and non-reinstated letters was the focus on Barriers to Success. Barriers to Success showed up in reinstated letters at a rate of 5 percentage points more than that in non-reinstated letters (27% vs. 22% respectively). This difference could possibly be attributed to non-reinstated students not being ready or willing to share those details of what happened that led to their suspension, or not feeling that the past was as important as the present or future. Not providing the context of the past as it compares to Changes Made or Success Plans being put in place may have been detrimental to these students not being reinstated. Another way to see this phenomenon is by code count. The most frequent codes in reinstated letters were *family*, *goals*, *self-determination*, *work*, *personal responsibility*, and *support resources*. Whereas the most frequent codes in non-reinstated letters were *goals*, *time management*, *personal responsibility*, and *self-determination*. The non-reinstated letter codes were more focused on Success Planning and Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control, rather than Barriers to Success.

This research confirmed what was found in the literature review to support the key aspects of student success in the reinstatement process. While this research did not review whether reinstated students were successful upon their return, the initial hurdle students need to clear is to be approved for reinstatement. The reinstatement process is not a guarantee that students will be allowed to return, but the researchers found it is far more likely to happen when students provided context about what happened, what changed, and how they plan to be successful going forward. Therefore, if administrators are aware of, and look for, the main themes discussed in this research, they could likely make decisions in a more informed and less subjective manner. Where some of the non-reinstated letters closely resembled reinstated letters, the researchers posited that either lack of detail or misalignment of what was described in the

letters with academic record information, which was also not reviewed in this study, led to unsuccessful reinstatement decisions.

Limitations

Convenience sampling was used which prevented the researchers from choosing how many appeal letters to review. As some demographic information like gender and country of origin were not directly provided, it was not possible to truly assess whether narrative structure was approached differently amongst the student letters. The students identified as immigrants to the United States were amongst those reinstated, suggesting that their storytelling ability did not negatively impact their reinstatement. The researchers did not investigate the impact of interpretation; therefore, it is unknown whether an impression of narrative fidelity played a role in the decision-making process for this group of students, as is posited for some of the non-reinstated letters. The researchers recognized the inherent subjectivity in the coding process.

Future Research

Potential future research could include reviewing narrative aspects included in reinstated letters compared to success upon return. Were students able to make the changes they described in their letters? Did they actively engage with support resources? Vulnerability in personal narrative is another area for future research as it may provide insight as to how gender or cultural roles impact the level of deep disclosure provided in each personal narrative. Additionally, future research could compare not just the aspects found in the reinstatement letters, but also how those aspects compared to or matched up with the student's academic record to corroborate congruency. Investigating the impact of how the reader interprets the story, and if confidence in narrative fidelity determines reinstatement would add value to a future study on the reinstatement from suspension process.

Conclusion

Degree completion is a key marker of student success. For the growing numbers of non-traditional students, including students who are caring for others or working full-time, a range of factors may cause GPA and completion rate to fall resulting in an academic suspension. For students who want to continue their education, they must go through a reinstatement process which often includes submitting a personal narrative to the institution to be considered for reinstatement. The personal narrative provides a window into students' lives institutional administrators rarely have a chance to get to know. The information provided in the letters not only gives administrators a chance to assess future student success but can also provide direction on how to align institutional resources to best support students.

With dwindling enrollments, higher education institutions must work hard to retain and graduate the students they have. This study sought to understand which aspects of student reinstatement appeal letters lent themselves to interpreting future academic success in order to make a reinstatement decision. The results of this research aimed to improve the reinstatement process, especially when considering the factors that impact success for diverse, adult learners, for institutions of higher education who hope to retain and ultimately, see these students graduate.

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