

Giving First-Year Students a Second Chance

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Abstract: In Spring 2017, University of South Florida implemented a Deferred Probation procedure to redress the issues first-year students often face in their transition to the university. Under the previous procedure, first-year students could be academically dismissed prior to completing two full semesters at the university. Summer admits were particularly disadvantaged as they could be dismissed as early as fall without having a full academic year to demonstrate their academic abilities. Due to Winter Break closures, the university was challenged with a reduced timeframe to assist these students, particularly those who had extenuating circumstances that might reverse their dismissal. As a result of the Deferred Probation procedure, 35 first-year students were granted one additional semester to address their academic standing, positively affecting the university's first-year persistence metric. This paper will discuss literature about first-year academic probation students, origins of the Deferred Probation procedure, current data on this population of students, and the potential of this procedure as a strategy to increase first-year persistence and graduation rates.

keywords: academic dismissal, first-year students, persistence, probation, retention

Introduction

The assessment and evaluation of first-year student retention rates is common in states with performance-based funding models. Florida is one of the states with this model, which created the need for the University of South Florida (USF) to review policies and procedures with a potential impact on first-year student persistence. This review led to assessing the data on academic dismissals for first-year students. The data clearly supported a need to revise the institution's academic probation and dismissal procedures to accommodate for first-year transition issues. In Spring 2017, University of South Florida implemented a Deferred Probation procedure to redress the issues first-year students often face in their transition to the university. The Deferred Probation procedure grants first-year students one additional semester to address their academic standing. In this paper, we include a review of the literature concerning first-year academic probation, the data in support of updating procedure, the description of both the former and revised procedure, and outcomes of the revised procedure. Additionally, there will be discussion on implications for practice and future research opportunities.

Literature Review

Nationally, the first-to-second-year retention rate for all institutional types is 68.8% (ACT, 2017). An estimated 24% of students earn less than a 2.0 Grade Point Average (GPA) during their first year of college (Allen, Robbins, & Sawyer, 2010). At most institutions, earning less than a 2.0 GPA lands students on academic probation or academic watch. A study by Kim (2015) supported the notion that there is a positive relationship between college academic performance and first-year retention. As more states are measuring their colleges and universities based on performance metrics like first-year retention,

there is an increased focus on ensuring that the first-year population succeeds academically and persists to their second year.

Based on the research, there are myriad reasons why first-year students demonstrate academic underachievement. Often, students who end up in academic distress exhibit a lack of preparation to meet the academic demands of college (Balduf, 2009; Cuseo, 2018). These students demonstrated success in high school without exerting much effort even while taking challenging coursework (Balduf, 2009). Therefore, they do not possess adequate academic success skills such as appropriate study techniques and note-taking. Additionally, students may struggle with time management as an abundance of “free time” in college leads to procrastination, which leaves students without suitable time to properly prepare for exams or complete assignments (Balduf, 2009).

Motivation and self-efficacy play a critical part in a student’s ability to initially succeed or recover from academic distress. Underachieving students often exhibit a lack of self-discipline to study, which may be related to a decreased internal motivation to succeed (Balduf, 2009) or academic disinterest in the course content or delivery (Cuseo, 2018). Other times, students may start their first semester confident in their academic abilities, but when they are unsuccessful, their self-efficacy weakens (Tinto, 2017). Subsequently, students may not feel like they are academically prepared to succeed in the college classroom, which leads to a decrease in motivation to persist and learn. In one qualitative study, students on academic probation reported “being lost” which may personify their feelings after not succeeding academically (Mellor, Brooks, Gray, & Jordan, 2015). Other factors that may impact students’ academic performance are low institutional commitment (weak resolve to persist and graduate from the institution), competing commitments outside of the institution (i.e. work, family, etc.), irrelevancy of college coursework to long-term career plans, and difficulty adjusting to the initial differences and demands prevalent in the first-year transition (Cuseo, 2018).

As students who academically underperform their first year are at risk of not persisting into the second year, many institutions offer both proactive and reactive interventions to assist students. Of 27 four-year public institutions, 85.2% ran programs designed for students who were identified as academically at-risk. Of those, only 60.9% rated that their programs were “very” or “somewhat effective.” Additionally, 92.6% provided individualized academic recovery plans for students on academic probation or suspension. Only 64% rated that strategy as “very” or “somewhat effective” (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017).

Interventions vary in the type and scope of support they offer to students on academic probation. To address deficiencies in academic success skills, some institutions integrate these topics into the first-year seminar or the first-year curriculum (Cuseo, 2018). In one study, a study skills class geared towards students on academic probation reduced the likelihood of dismissal and improved academic self-efficacy (Mellor, Brooks, Gray, & Jordan, 2015). However, these students did not experience an increase in GPA after completing the course, which may point to the need for more time for students to develop an increased self-efficacy which could translate into an increased GPA.

To address student motivation and self-efficacy, Tinto (2017) recommends that institutions provide timely support at the onset of academic or social struggles. By communicating that first-year academic struggles are the rule rather than the exception, institutions can assist students in normalizing their experience and finding their academic fit in college (Tinto, 2017). Encouragement from friends, family, and the institution can instill positivity in academically struggling students and provide them with the mindset to succeed (Barouch-Gilbert, 2016). In Balduf’s (2009) study, students on academic probation benefitted from improved behaviors (study skills, time management, etc.) and improved attitudes (finding motivation when experiencing classroom challenges). As students demonstrate academic success, they also see an increase in self-efficacy, positive emotional changes, and a sense of having control over their life and future (Barouch-Gilbert, 2016).

Background

As part of the State University System, the University of South Florida participates in Performance Based Funding and is measured on achievement of specific metrics including first-year retention rates. Located in Tampa, USF is a public metropolitan research institution with a population of 30,000+ undergraduate students. Historically, it enrolls 4,000+ first-year students each summer/fall. The Fall 2016 FTIC (First Time in College) profile included an average SAT score of 1226 and average high school GPA of a 4.1, with 40% Pell eligible (University of South Florida - System, 2017). The summer admitted population of FTIC students have lower average SAT scores and lower average high school GPAs. However, the retention metric includes the summer admits who continue into the first fall as full-time students, as well as the fall students. The institution's first-year retention rate had hovered around 89% since 2012. At the start of the 2016-17 academic year, it became imperative that USF meet its aspirational goal of a 90% first-year retention rate. As stated in the *Student Affairs & Student Success 2016-17 Annual Report*, (University of South Florida-Tampa, 2017) achieving this goal "would unlock significant performance-based funding and establish USF as a preeminent institution under state guidelines."

To meet these metrics, USF implemented myriad programs and policies to positively impact these numbers. This included a revision of existing policies to ensure they met these student success goals. The last revision of academic probation and dismissal procedures was updated in the 2011-12 academic catalog, making it an obvious choice for consideration as a potential barrier to first-year student retention. The need to make a timely evaluation and update of the academic probation and dismissal procedures meant that the best approach was to pilot the procedure first on the Summer/Fall 2016 FTIC students who, having experienced early transition challenges were already on their way to academic dismissal before they started into the spring of their first year.

The Office of Academic Advocacy (OAA) initiated the proposal to revise the academic probation and dismissal procedures. Established in 2013 to support improvements in the six-year graduation rates, OAA added first-year persistence to its charge in 2014. The office grew in 2016 with two dedicated first-year persistence advocates. Leadership in OAA consists of a director, an assistant director with special emphasis on persistence, and a data support advocate. They are located within Undergraduate Studies, which is part of the Student Affairs & Student Success division. Their work with first-year persistence and case management of students experiencing barriers to persistence gave them specific insights to the impact of these particular policies and into appropriate criteria and standards for the assessment of adjustments to the policies and procedures. They wrote the procedure proposal and collected data in support of the proposal.

Policy and procedure revisions require a great deal of collaboration to establish. Creating a climate of collaboration towards student success came from the highest executive levels. The Provost and Executive Vice President communicated clearly that "student success does not belong to a particular office...it is a shared responsibility" (University of South Florida-Tampa, 2017). The establishment of a Persistence Committee with executive level support contributed to the timely revision of academic probation and dismissal procedures. Their support was not the only approval required, but Persistence Committee support smoothed the way for the next steps.

Statement of Problem

The University of South Florida lost 93 first-year students from the 2015 cohort to academic dismissal before the 2016 fall semester. Sixty percent of those dismissed had a USF GPA above 1.0, and those with a USF GPA below 1.0 typically experienced situations beyond their control that could warrant withdrawals from some classes or their entire preceding semester. Under the previous procedure, first-year students could be academically dismissed prior to completing two full semesters at the university.

Summer admits were particularly disadvantaged as they could be dismissed as early as fall without having a full academic year to demonstrate their academic abilities. Students placed on academic dismissal had future registration removed upon dismissal and were coded as inactive students. Due to Winter Break closures, the university was challenged with a reduced timeframe to assist these students, particularly those who had extenuating circumstances that might reverse their dismissal. Therefore, it became evident that USF needed to address these challenges through policy and procedure reform to assist this population of students.

Deferred Dismissal Procedure

The current Academic Probation and Dismissal procedure at the University of South Florida states that the first time a student's institutional grade point average drops below 2.0, the student is placed on academic probation. From the beginning of academic probation the student must earn a 2.0 or better semester GPA to continue at the university. Students who earn less than a 2.0 semester GPA while on academic probation will be academically dismissed from the university. Once academically dismissed, students may not return to studies at the institution for a full calendar year. After the year, they are eligible to petition for Reinstatement and Academic Renewal. Academic Renewal involves restarting a student's institutional GPA upon their return after an academic dismissal.

Prior to the most recent revision, the last review and update of USF's Academic Probation and Dismissal procedure was in 2011. This update changed the way a student could return to USF following an academic dismissal. Prior to 2011, students could gain reinstatement to the university the very next semester following the dismissal without requiring any period of reflection or demonstration of academic success. This could potentially increase the amount of time it took for students to earn their degrees as they could be dismissed and reinstated numerous times without improving their institution GPAs or making sufficient academic progress towards their degrees.

In early 2016, USF completed its most recent review of the academic renewal criteria. The review included academic dismissal and reinstatement policies and procedures from all Florida State University System (SUS) schools, as well as Association of American Universities (AAU) institutions. The review also uncovered that academic renewal procedures are unique to the Florida SUS. After the review, necessary changes to the academic renewal criteria and processing procedures brought the criteria for approving academic renewal more in line with USF's Degree Progression and Graduation policy. The Degree Progression policy at USF established guidelines for the timely degree progression and graduation of undergraduate students. The updated Academic Probation and Dismissal procedure required students to meet with an academic advisor to create a degree plan that detailed what courses they needed to take upon return, thus, encouraging timely completion to their degree.

During this shift in procedure, USF continued to focus on improving first-year retention numbers and was exploring different ways to provide targeted support to FTIC students in their first year. USF lost 2.4% (101) of the 2014 Summer/Fall FTIC cohort and 2.2% (93) of the 2015 Summer/Fall FTIC cohort to academic dismissal. A review of policies at other institutions highlighted examples of different academic probation policies for FTIC students or other special populations. The policy at Florida Atlantic University was the only one to address and provide support for FTIC students in their first year of studies. Students at USF can be placed on academic dismissal following their second semester and many FTIC students experience transition issues that cannot be completely addressed in one semester. Therefore, with the support of USF's Persistence Committee the Office of Academic Advocacy decided to take a closer look at the individual situations of FTIC students who were academically dismissed from the 2014 and 2015 Summer/Fall cohorts during their first year.

Since the creation of the Office of Academic Advocacy in 2013, academic advocates have been finding and assisting students experiencing transition issues or barriers to graduation. These students often needed an additional semester to return to good academic standing or complete degree requirements. Many times, students who had been academically dismissed would meet with an academic

advocate and disclose extenuating circumstances that impacted their academic performance. If the student's case was compelling, the academic advocates would petition to the Dean of Undergraduate Studies on the student's behalf. The Dean of Undergraduate Studies recognized that there were extenuating circumstances for some students and could approve academic probation extensions for these students which allowed them to continue for another semester before they were subject to academic dismissal. If approved, their academic standing was updated, and they would be able to re-register for the following semester.

This reactive approach to assisting academically dismissed students presented challenges. For summer students who were dismissed after fall, there was a limited timeframe to get academic assistance as the university closed for Winter Break. Additionally, since the students were already academically dismissed, they were dropped from their spring coursework. Once their probation extension was approved, they were able to re-register. However, some of their courses were no longer available. Due to these challenges, the persistence advocates proposed that an automatically granted additional semester on academic probation would create an opportunity to assist those students who would have been academically dismissed. This included assistance for students who needed to withdraw from courses in previous semesters when personal situations could have caused academic hardship; assistance with connecting students with appropriate resources and with their academic advisor; and provided one-on-one support from an academic advocate for an additional semester. The proposal went forward with the Persistence Committee's support. From there, the proposal gained approval by the academic and administrative councils necessary to update procedure. The update to the academic dismissal procedure was approved in time for a pilot in Spring 2017 and went into effect for the 2017-2018 catalog year. The majority of the data reviewed in this paper is based on students participating in the Spring 2017 pilot.

Based on the Deferred Probation procedure, students would need to be identified during their second semester on academic probation to avoid the automatic academic dismissal and subsequent removal of their future registration. Prior to grades posting at the end of the semester, the academic standing of eligible students was updated to DP (deferred probation) to indicate they were a FTIC student on academic probation in their first year at USF. This avoided the change in academic standing and the cancellation of future registration. USF piloted this process in Spring 2017 for the 2016 Summer/Fall FTIC cohort. Due to this timing, the deferred probation opportunity was not available for those Summer 2016 students, and they were academically dismissed.

The students who were able to continue into Spring 2017 but required the deferred probation at the end of semester were invited to attend a day of programming the Friday prior to the start of the Fall 2017 semester. This event was optional for any FTIC student with a GPA below 2.5 and highly recommended to all DP students. The DP students could not be required to attend as the event occurred outside of the term dates. Without mandating attendance, 19 of the 35 (54%) DP students participated in the event. Academic advocates offered individual meetings to the remaining students who were unable to attend the event.

The advocates outreached and coordinated with all students on academic probation to ensure they were registered in appropriate classes for GPA recovery and to refer to academic resources and targeted support from campus resources. They also worked with the DP students to assist those who needed to select another major due to poor performance in their original major. The goal was to provide proactive and intrusive engagement with these students to enhance their chance of academic success in future terms.

Results

The data analysis compares the academic dismissal rates of FTIC students in their first year and the academic standing changes over the first year for students admitted in summer and fall. This provides insights to how the Deferred Probation procedure impacted first-year progress from the first fall enrolled to the second fall. In addition, data addressed the impact on students' academic progress when provided deferred probation.

Figure 1 portrays first-year dismissal rates of summer and fall FTIC admits who continued in good standing or academic probation to their second fall term. The comparison reveals a decrease in students who were academically dismissed prior to the second fall term. In 2014, there were 4163 summer and fall students admitted as FTIC with 101 academically dismissed prior to Fall 2015 (2.4%). In 2015, there were 4174 summer and fall students admitted as FTIC with 93 dismissed prior to Fall 2016 (2.2%). In 2016, there were 4079 summer and fall students admitted as FTIC with 26 dismissals prior to Fall 2017 (0.63%). As stated previously, the Deferred Probation procedure was applied for the first time in Spring 2017, so the 26 dismissals from the 2016 cohort represent summer admits dismissed after Fall 2016 and summer/fall admits granted DP in Spring 2017 who subsequently were dismissed after Summer 2017.

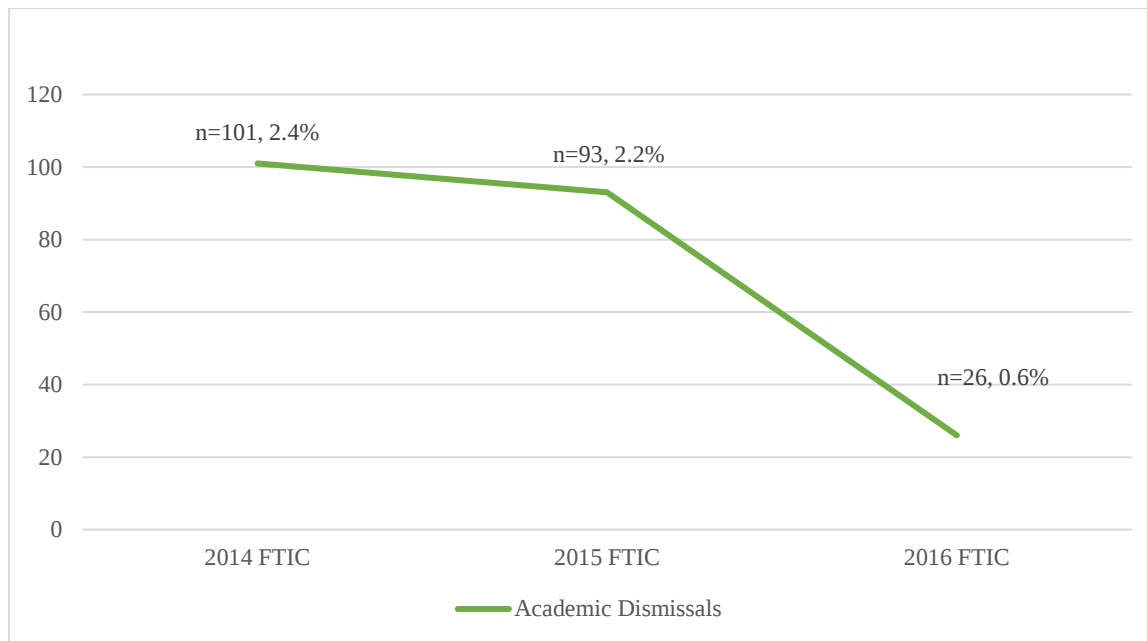


Figure 1: First year dismissal rates for FTIC cohorts 2014 – 2016

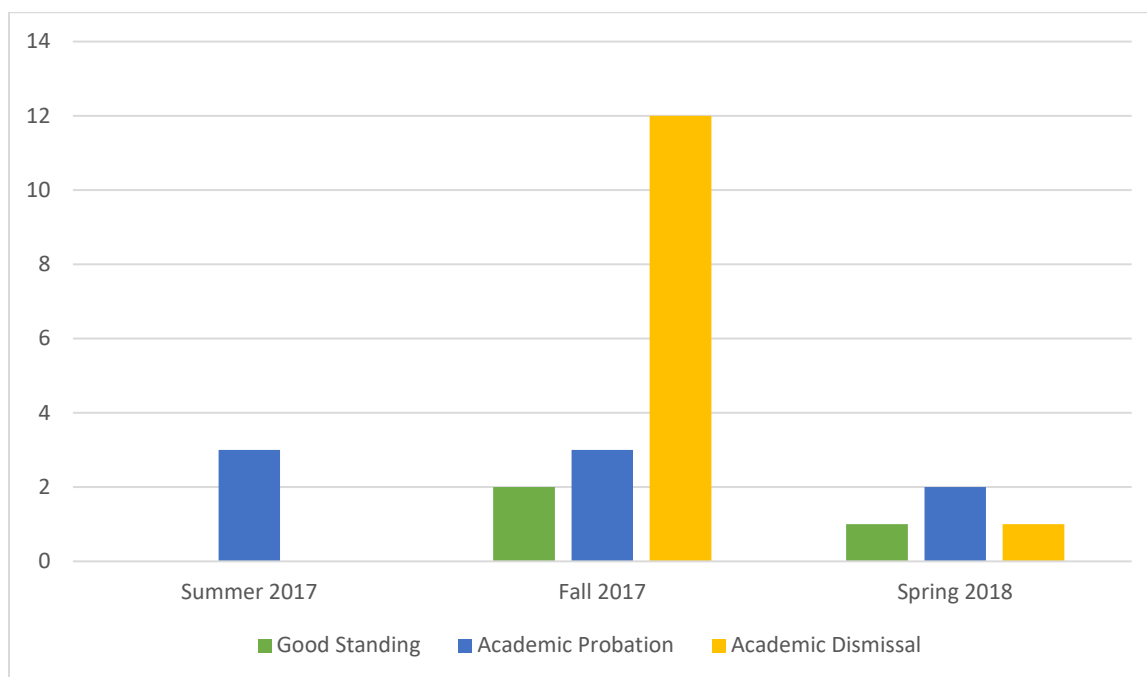


Figure 2: Academic standing of Deferred Probation (DP) students admitted in Summer 2016 (n = 17)

In order to assess the academic progress of students for whom the Deferred Probation procedure applied, the data were reviewed to reveal trends in academic standing per semester for both the Summer 2016 and Fall 2016 students. Of the 17 Summer 2016 students who received the deferred probation status, three enrolled in summer 2017 and earned the required 2.0 term GPA to continue into Fall 2017 (see Figure 2). Of the Fall 2016 students who received the deferred probation status, seven enrolled in Summer 2017 and earned the required 2.0 term GPA to continue into Fall 2017 (see Figure 3). In Fall 2017, there were 17 Summer 2016 admits with the DP status who enrolled and, of those, two achieved good standing with a USF GPA of at least a 2.0, three remained on academic probation, and twelve were academically dismissed. Of the Fall 2016 admits with the DP status who enrolled for Fall 2017, three achieved good standing, three remained on academic probation, and twelve were academically dismissed.

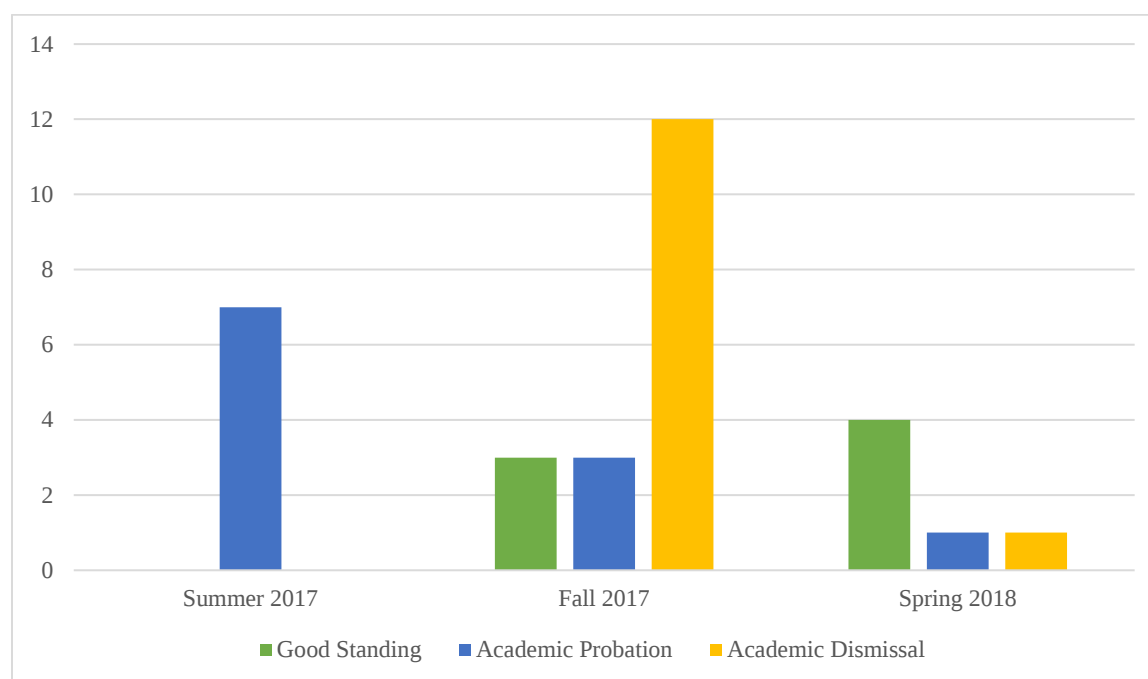


Figure 3: Academic standing of DP students admitted in Fall 2016 (n = 18)

Then, by Spring 2018 there were four Summer 2016 students enrolled who had received the DP status. One achieved good standing, two remained on academic probation, and one was academically dismissed. Of those admitted Fall 2016 who received the DP status, six were enrolled for Spring 2018. Four achieved good standing, one remained on academic probation, and one was academically dismissed.

The results reveal that application of the deferred probation saved 35 students from academic dismissal. Of those 35, eight students currently have the opportunity to persist into their third year. Based on retention metrics, those students returning into their second fall on DP status constituted 0.86% of the total FTIC retention percentage of 90.04%.

Discussion

The results from this first group of students affected by the newly created Deferred Probation procedure supported the goal of the institution to give first year students a “second chance” at persisting. The 35 students who would have been academically dismissed were given the time and support to demonstrate their resilience to bounce back from their academic setbacks. Of the 35 students who took

advantage of the DP status, 11 students (31.4%) successfully earned at least a 2.0 semester GPA in the fall semester in order to stay at USF. This was a positive gain for both the individual students and the institution.

The DP procedure was implemented in Spring 2017; therefore, the population of students is small. In the future, there will be a large enough sample size to analyze this population of students. While there are students who maximized the opportunity for their “second chance” at USF, there are students who took advantage of the extra semester but did not succeed. Therefore, there is a need to assess both the academic history of the students who were ultimately dismissed, as well as their utilization of the support offered to them. A statistical analysis exploring the relationship between first-year academic history, like GPA and earned credit hours, and first-year academic standing after DP could give information about which students have a better chance of being successful. This information opens up discussions about whether specific parameters should be set for students to be automatically offered DP status based on their first-year academic history. Additionally, students who continue at USF on DP are not required to utilize support services. Future research into the actions of successful versus unsuccessful students could inform the implementation of requirements that students must meet as a condition of their DP status.

Another area for future exploration could be the adaptation of a Deferred Probation procedure for transfer students. First-semester transfer students can experience academic and social transition difficulties akin to the first-year students. The most prevalent transfer students transition topic is that of transfer shock (Hills, 1965), the tendency for transfer students’ GPAs to decline after their first semester at their transfer institution. Moreover, transfer students may have difficulty establishing social connections due to already-established friendships at the university (Ellis, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2008-2009). Both academic and social transition challenges could manifest into poor academic performance. Therefore, transfer students could also benefit from a “second chance” to demonstrate their academic abilities. Future research could be done to determine what benefit there might be in implementing policy and procedures for this population.

Conclusion

The metrics-based culture in Florida precipitated the need for institutions like USF who have already initiated programs and processes that positively affect larger student populations to work on a micro level to ensure that each individual student is receiving the support and opportunity to persist, progress, and graduate. The Deferred Probation procedure illustrates an example of an institutional change that impacts a relatively small number of students. However, due to the updated procedure, USF was able to assist 35 students in persisting from their first to their second year. Moreover, eight of those students are currently persisting into their third year. This is positive on both the student level as their academic journey has not been disrupted, and the institutional level as these students count in both the persistence metrics and, should the students continue persisting, the graduation metrics.

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