

**SUPPORTING STUDENT RETENTION, SUCCESS, & SENSE OF MATTERING:
A RELATIONSHIP-CENTERED ACADEMIC RECOVERY PROGRAM**

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Educational Leadership.

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For my parents, Tom and Martha, who have always believed in me, supported me, and reminded me to do all the good I can, in all the ways I can, for all the people I can...

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Abstract

Traditional academic recovery structures, based in deficit ideology, fail to effectively support academic success and retention for university students. Academic probation policies may implicitly or explicitly communicate to students the problem lies within themselves and it is their responsibility to fix it—or face academic suspension. These approaches fail to address systemic barriers and result in inequitable outcomes. The proposed improvement initiative is a credit-bearing academic recovery course with pedagogical foundations in sense of mattering and meaningful relationships. First-year students with eligible GPA are enrolled in the course during the semester immediately following their placement on academic probation. Course curriculum includes practical activities around three topics: 1) building relationships for academic success, 2) practicing learning strategies, and 3) strengthening holistic wellbeing. Course discussions, activities, and assignments are designed to develop meaningful relationships to support increased sense of mattering. Decades of research supports a strong sense of mattering is critical for academic motivation, resilience, persistence, and success. By increasing sense of mattering, the short-term goal of the improvement initiative is to improve rates of academic recovery and retention for course participants. The long-term goal is to address systemic barriers and to advance more equitable outcomes for student academic success. The problem identification, initiative design, and improvement measures follow the framework and methodology of improvement science.

Keywords: academic recovery, academic probation, equity-based framework of support, improvement science, retention, sense of mattering

The Disquisition

The disquisition is formal, problem-based discourse. The disquisition is closely aligned with the scholar-practitioner role of Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) students and thus takes on a practical focus rather than the theoretical focus of traditional Ph.D. dissertations. The purpose of the disquisition is “to document the scholarly development of leadership expertise in organizational improvement” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5). The Ed.D. program at WCU nurtures and matures students as both scholars and practitioners who are trained to understand systems and institutional challenges and opportunities through a lens of research and scholarship. Students apply their knowledge, using their institutional access and positionality, directly to the educational institutions where they lead. The Ed.D. is an applied degree, and the disquisition is similarly an applied capstone experience for doctoral work. The disquisition at WCU specifically utilizes an Improvement Science methodology, is shaped by critical theory and scholarly research, and engages the candidate in the application of the concepts in an applied manner through the development and implementation of an intervention within their local institution, focused on improvement of equity within that system. Ultimately, the disquisition serves as documentation and assessment of an improvement initiative that “contributes to a concrete good to the larger community and the dissemination of new relevant knowledge” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5).¹

Lomotey, K. (2020). *The Disquisition at Western Carolina University: The Capstone Experience in the University's EdD Program*. Unpublished manuscript, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC.

¹ Statement prepared by Alison Joseph, Ed.D. and Educational Leadership faculty

Problem: Ineffective Academic Recovery Programs in Higher Education

Devyn entered the highly-selective private university as a transfer student from a local community college. A strong student in high school, his transfer GPA was a 4.0. He earned a prestigious scholarship, which covered almost 90% of the cost to attend the costly private institution. As Devyn prepared to transfer, his mother died of cancer. Though struggling with grief, Devyn's grandmother encouraged him to embrace the educational opportunity and enroll as a full-time student.

Devyn started the fall semester strong, earning A's and B's in his first few weeks of school. Then the unthinkable happened: his grandmother passed away suddenly. Estranged from his father since early childhood, Devyn had lost the two people who raised him. He turned to his friends for support, but did not share information with his faculty or academic advisor. Devyn missed class for over two weeks, barely getting out of bed except to occasionally go to the dining hall. He fell behind in classes and found it difficult to focus or concentrate. He would read a page of his textbook and find that he couldn't remember what he had read after he closed the book. Devyn's grades plummeted that term. He finished the semester with three F's and one C-. Though faculty sent early warning emails with notice of academic support, they never knew what had happened. They never asked what was really going on.

In late-December, he received the academic probation letter in his university email. The letter outlined the requirement that he earn a C+ GPA in his spring term, or he would be suspended from Elon. The letter reminded him to take advantage of academic support, pointing him to the resources on the website. Devyn glanced at the email as he spent the winter break alone in his residence hall room. He promised himself he would do better in the spring. No

person ever reached out to Devyn to understand what had led to the low grades, or what he really needed to be successful.

The grief Devyn experienced in the fall had developed into depression by spring term. Devyn met with a university counselor at the start of the spring term and was referred to see someone off-campus for more regular and long-term therapy. At the first appointment, Devyn found the off-campus counselor didn't accept his Medicaid. He received the first \$150 bill and cancelled his appointments. He had not shared with counseling services that he was on Medicaid, and he did not report back to them what had happened. Devyn was embarrassed and ashamed of his financial status, often feeling like the only "poor" student at a private institution where the average family income topped \$200,000. He tried tutoring services once more, but it didn't seem to help. He had no problems comprehending the material, he just couldn't find the motivation to get to class or complete his assignments.

By mid-terms, Devyn was earning two D's and two C's. He knew he needed to earn a C+ in order to avoid academic suspension. He withdrew from two of his courses per the advice his academic advisor sent via email, agreeing he should focus his time and energy on the remaining two. Devyn tried tutoring services a few times in the spring, experiencing the same pattern as he had in the fall. He continued to struggle with his mental health and getting to class. His faculty members sent a few early warning notices, reminding him of the importance of attending class and encouraging him to meet with his advisor to come up with a plan. Devyn had only met his advisor once in the fall to ask a question about course registration. He never reached out to him in the spring, feeling uncomfortable and unsure of sharing his struggles with him. At the end of the spring term, he managed to earn a C and a B in his two courses—resulting in a spring term

GPA of 2.5 and a letter confirming his continued probation. Devyn felt a glimmer of hope. He could focus on his mental health over the summer and start afresh in the fall.

That June, Devyn received a letter from financial aid. Due to his grades and course withdrawals, he had lost his university scholarship and all of his federal and state financial aid. He would need to take out personal loans to cover the cost of his education, if he could find a co-signer to guarantee the loan. The educational opportunity that had previously cost less than \$7,000 per year, would now cost almost \$60,000. Though academically eligible to continue, Devyn could not find a co-signer or take on tens of thousands of dollars in debt. Devyn withdrew from his fall semester classes and never returned.

Although fictional, Devyn is inspired by dozens of students with whom I have worked over the years. His story is like those of myriad students who have experienced personal and life struggles resulting in academic probation. Support systems and processes often rely on students to have the knowledge and confidence to contact the right office and share the right information in order to receive guidance and resources. Students don't know what they don't know. Processes and systems do not effectively intervene at the right time and in the right way. These processes rely on students to be able to name their struggles, identify the right office to contact, make the initial outreach, and share the relevant information.

A Nationwide Problem in Higher Education

Universities across the nation continue to grapple with student attrition, retention, persistence, and success. Struggles that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were magnified following extended periods of remote learning (Donaldson, 2022; Hanover Research, 2020; Howell et al., 2022). In response to these trends, many K-12 education systems have increased teacher education focused on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed techniques, and

strengthening holistic support in classroom settings. Yet approaches to supporting student academic recovery in higher education continue to rely on traditional referrals for tutoring, study skills, and academic standing systems fail to identify and address underlying barriers impacting academic success. These higher education academic probation interventions do not effectively support student academic recovery and retention (Bledsoe, 2019; Burke Leon, et al., 2019; Nutter & Perrin, 2023). Ineffective academic support has a disproportionate negative impact on students with marginalized identities, particularly students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, black, indigenous, or Latinx (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2016; Robinson, 2019; Rodney, 2022; Simpson, 2016; Steele, 2022).

Researchers have highlighted that some academic standing and recovery strategies may result in students' experiencing shame, guilt, and embarrassment (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012; Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Robinson, 2019) because strategies often highlight student deficits and are based in teacher/ administrator bias (Capello, 2019; Gorksi, 2011; Lee, 2018; Robinson, 2019; Versalle, 2018; Virtue, 2021). Rojas (2021) noted that students' stories of being notified of their academic probation status included descriptions of, "disappointment, nervousness, anxiety, fear, panic, and depression, all mixed in with low levels of self-worth and feeling like a failure" (p. 160). Yet this seminal point in a student's academic experience should not be one of punishment but of enhanced support. There is substantial research to guide interventions that effectively support academic recovery and lead to increased retention and persistence. Universities must develop research-informed and equity-centered interventions to better support student success.

Academic Recovery Processes

The process of a student moving from poor standing to good standing is broadly labeled as “academic recovery.” Academic recovery includes all of the strategies that universities implement in order to move a student towards good standing. Academic recovery programs may be optional or required, as outlined in the university’s academic standing policy. Mandatory programs require a student to engage in certain activities based on their academic standing. For example, a student may be required to enroll in an academic recovery seminar (no credit), a credit-bearing course, or meet a certain number of times with an academic advisor in the semester following an academic warning. Program structure, pedagogy, curriculum, and learning outcomes vary widely. As a result, reported outcomes of academic recovery programs vary greatly and may include misleading data related to success rates (Sasso, et al., 2021). For example, a recent report on the success of an academic recovery program highlighted a 72% retention rate for program participants (Nutter & Perrin, 2023), yet less than 40% of eligible students enrolled in this optional program.

The Local Context

Improvement science is grounded in the principle that we must see the system that produces the results. The following section provides an overview of the local context. This includes important foundational information regarding institution demographics, structure, key departments and policies, as well as a history of the data and initiatives related to the problem. Finally, the section includes a brief description of the scholar-practitioner and rationale for prioritizing this improvement work.

Organizational Context and Demographics

The local context for this improvement work is a private, mid-size, liberal arts university located in rural North Carolina. With historic ties to the United Church of Christ, Elon

University's mission statement provides a vision of, "an academic community that transforms mind, body, and spirit and encourages freedom of thought and liberty of conscience." Elon is recognized for strong high-impact practices and a student-centered, relationship-rich culture. Elon is a historically and predominately-white institution. In fall 2022, 17% of undergraduate students identified as non-white (Elon University Division of Inclusive Excellence, 2023). Elon is also an institution comprised of predominately-wealthy students, with a median family income over \$200,000. Estimated annual expenses for 2022-2023 totaled \$59,627 and the discount rate was around 21%, resulting in an average net attendance price of \$42,000 per year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). About a third of Elon students receive some need-based aid each year; of those students, about 60% of financial need is met (Common Data Set, 2023).

Elon University's organizational structure includes seven vice presidents who report to the president of the university and the board of trustees. Vice presidents oversee multiple divisions and reporting areas. Each division and reporting area may include a dozen or more offices and hundreds of staff. Departments and areas central to the problem and improvement work include the Koenigsberger Learning Center, the Office of Student Care & Outreach, the Department of Financial Aid, and the Academic Standing Committee.

The Koenigsberger Learning Center (KLC) is comprised of the offices of academic advising learning assistance, disabilities resources, and the Elon 1010 First-Year Advising Seminar program. The KLC sits within the division of academic affairs and reports to the associate provost for academic affairs. The Koenigsberger Learning Center opened in 2018. Prior to the opening of the KLC, the academic advising and academic support offices at Elon were built and led by two professional staff who each served at Elon for over 25 years and retired in 2020. Up until that point, academic advising and support processes were strongly associated with

these two individuals—who were known to spend long hours, nights, and weekends meeting one-on-one with students to provide individualized mentoring and support. A new executive director was named in spring 2023. The academic advising and learning assistance areas now include ten professional staff members. These staff serve as academic advisors to a case load of students, implement initiatives related to academic support such as academic strategies workshops and tutoring services. The Academic Advising and Elon 1010 offices also provide training, guidance and professional development opportunities for over six hundred faculty and staff across more than seventy majors and degree programs.

The Office of Student Care and Outreach coordinates individual outreach, support, and resources for students referred by faculty, staff, peers, and even family members. This office serves students who may be struggling or in distress, and those experiencing family and personal emergencies. Located within the division of student life, the office reports to the assistant dean of students. This office responds to referrals from faculty and other community members, including academic-related concerns such as repeated or prolonged absences with no communication, students disclosing mental health concerns impacting attendance or completion of coursework, and students displaying substantial emotional distress during meetings or as part of submitted coursework. From 2021-2023, the director of student care and outreach worked with colleagues in IT to develop an internal system to combine student data from various university platforms—including academic information (e.g. grades, learning management system log-in frequency, academic alerts and warnings, etc.) and behavioral information (swipe card usage, conduct or emergency incident referrals, notes from RA's, club and organization membership). This information dashboard provided helpful context as staff met with students to provide guidance

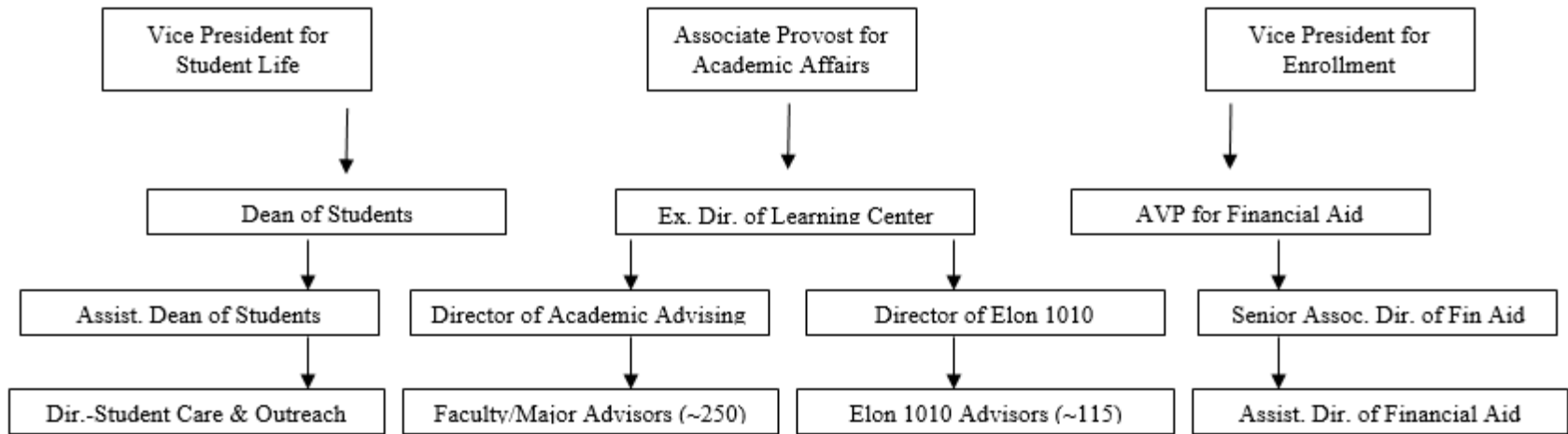
and support. Due to the private and sensitive nature of the information, only a handful of staff have access to the dashboard.

The financial aid department is responsible for setting and implementing policies and procedures related to eligibility and disbursement of university, state, and federal financial aid. This department reports to the vice president for enrollment. With a relatively small university endowment, the staff in the office of financial aid have the difficult job of developing and communicating aid packages that rarely meet the full financial need of students and their families (annual rate of 61% of need met). With the complexity of financial aid policies and unique requirements, faculty and staff outside the department rarely have an awareness of the nuanced connections between grades, course/credit loads, course withdrawals, course completion and academic progress rates, and financial aid eligibility.

The figure below depicts a simplified organization chart representing the reporting structure of the departments and leaders within the system.

Figure 1

Organization Chart



History and Review of the Problem in the Local Context

The number of first-year students on academic probation after their first semester has substantially increased over the past four years. Additionally, an even higher portion of these students are demonstrating the most severe academic distress – with a GPA below 1.0. Historically, we have underserved these students, especially those from economically-marginalized backgrounds. Students with the lowest GPA face a substantial challenge to successfully complete 67% of all attempted classes and earn a cumulative GPA of 1.7 at the end of their first year. Students must meet these federally-imposed minimum requirements in order to regain satisfactory academic progress and be eligible to continue receiving financial aid for their sophomore year.

Table 1

Academic Probation Trends for First-Year Students

	Academic Year (fall semester)				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Students placed on Academic Probation (AP)	50	82	91	99	78
Students with GPA below 1.0	12	24	34	43	23

Of the forty-three first-year students with a fall 2022 GPA below a 1.0, twenty-three did not return for fall 2023—less than a 50% retention rate. Of those twenty-three students, ten identify as students of color (43%). Only six of the ninety-nine students on academic probation were able to improve their academic performance in the spring term enough to be eligible receive aid for their sophomore year. Only one of the forty-three students with a fall GPA below 1.0 improved their performance enough to be academically eligible to receive aid for their sophomore year. Under the academic standing policy, all of these students are eligible to return

for fall of their sophomore year. With loss of financial aid and university scholarships, only those with substantial financial means are able to pay the full tuition rate in order to return.

While strong early intervention is a critical strategy for academic success, there will always be gaps in the voluntary processes that trigger early action. At Elon, faculty must notice there is a problem and submit an eWarning, advisors must contact the student, students must respond to the outreach and feel comfortable disclosing personal perspectives with the advisor, advisors must engage in effective guidance and referral to resources, students must connect with those resources. Each point in this sequence creates a higher likelihood that student needs will not be met. Thus, an academic standing policy with required academic recovery interventions may be a key opportunity to provide culturally-responsive and holistic guidance and support for students who are struggling.

In addition to the one-on-one outreach from academic advisors as well as staff in academic advising, learning assistance, and student care and outreach, there have been two structured academic recovery interventions that have been attempted in the past. Between 2000 and 2015, first-year students who appealed an academic suspension due to a first-term GPA of less than 1.0 were required to meet 3-4 times with a designated faculty or staff mentor during winter term. There was no structured curriculum or goals for the meetings, but the purpose was to check-in with the student and provide guidance. This program was not assessed and anecdotal information indicates there was no accountability if students did not schedule or attend meetings.

In winter of 2023, the director of learning assistance in the KLC offered a course to students who had earned a first semester GPA of 0.0. This course was not credit-bearing nor did it appear on the students' schedule. Twelve students received an email invitation and six attended at least one course session. The course was focused on improving academic and executive

functioning strategies: study skills, time management, prioritization, chunking, etc. Three students completed the program, but none of three continued into spring semester. The director offered three important hypotheses regarding the lack of success of this course: accountability, benefit, and structure. Since this was not a required course and students had nothing to “lose” by not attending, very few students accepted the invitation in the first place. Though several students voiced an interest, there was little external motivation for them to attend the first session—let alone continue with the next following meetings. This intersects with the next potential weaknesses of this model: students who were not internally motivated also had “nothing to gain” from participation. Though they may have gained certain academic strategies, there was no academic gain related to course credit nor GPA. Finally, because this was not a true course on their schedule, it was more like a series of workshops offered over four weeks. The initial invitation did not include the times of the classes, since the goal was to work around the student schedules. Though this flexibility was intended to increase the number of participants, it may have had the effect of providing less structure and consistency.

Policy Influences

Academic standing policies generally outline requirements for being “in good standing,” with performance below that considered “not in good standing.” Policies often include some form of warning or probation, suspension, dismissal, and appeal. Policies range from those based solely on GPA (e.g., a term GPA below 2.0 places a student on probation and a second consecutive term GPA below 2.0 results in suspension) to those involving a complex web of factors. For example, Harvard’s undergraduate policy stipulates a student will be required to immediately withdraw if they have more than one failing grade in a term, even if their term and cumulative GPA is above a 2.0, but also allows for a hearing panel to considering extenuating

circumstances to issue a probationary status or a decision to “take no action” (Harvard Student Handbook, 2023). University requirements for achieving good standing may or may not align with those for achieving satisfactory academic progress and eligibility for financial aid, which creates additional barriers for retention and success.

Academic standing processes outline how the policy is administered and implemented. This includes the manner and timing of evaluating and assigning a status associated with “not in good standing”; communicating the status to the student; next steps a student may or must take (e.g. meetings, classes, written plans, appeals, etc.); and any other process for reinstatement following a suspension. Processes typically include academic recovery programs. Some processes may involve communication with a parent or guardian, especially at the point where a student is academically dismissed.

Practices within the academic standing system comprise unwritten or loosely followed guidelines and cultural norms, such as the way in which academic advisors or professors may engage with or provide guidance to a student not in good standing. Though policies regarding institutional academic requirements have existed at universities for hundreds of years, the underlying assumptions and purposes of these systems are rarely examined or questioned (Barouch-Gilbert, 2019; Hoover, 2014).

Multiple scholars have highlighted that the purpose of an academic standing policy informs students’ experiences and outcomes: from communications to interventions and resources, from retention to relationships and mentoring student may encounter upon being placed on academic probation (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2011; Barouch-Gilbert, 2019; Cornelisz et al. 2020; Hoover, 2014; Sasso et al., 2021). First developed in the 1920’s and common by the 1940’s, academic standing policies had a disciplinary or exclusionary purpose, serving as a

notice to a student that their academic performance was deficient (Cornelisz et al. 2020; Fletcher & Tokmouline, 2018; Hoover, 2014). Aligned with increased university enrollment by the non-wealthy, probation policies created pathways for removing those students deemed “below average intelligence” or otherwise below academic performance standards at a university or within a certain major (Barouch-Gilbert, 2019, pp. 346-347). More recently, academic standing policies have begun to be utilized as an opportunity for identification and supportive intervention for students at-risk of not being retained (Berger et al., 2012; Sasso et al., 2021; Sneyers & De Witte, 2017). From this lens, it is essential to consider not only what universities stipulate as minimum academic requirements, but how they use academic standing policies to support student retention, persistence, and success.

The Elon University academic standing policy includes academic probation, continued probation, academic suspension, and dismissal. The policy also includes an appeal process for students with a first-time academic suspension (Elon University Academic Catalog, 2022).

- **Academic Probation:** Students whose cumulative GPA falls below 2.0 are placed on academic probation. Students on academic probation must earn a semester GPA greater than 2.0 until their cumulative GPA reaches 2.0.
- **Academic Suspension:** Students who earn a cumulative GPA below 2.0 for two consecutive semesters and who fail to earn a semester GPA above 2.0 are suspended for one semester.
- **Suspension Appeal:** Students may appeal a first suspension. Students who appeal are immediately reinstated and placed on continued probation.
- **Continued Probation:** Students whose cumulative GPA is below 2.0 must earn a semester GPA above 2.0 each semester until their cumulative GPA reaches 2.0. Students on continued probation who earn a semester GPA of 2.0 or lower will be academically suspended.

Based on the current policy, a first-year student could fail all courses in their first semester, all in their second semester, appeal for reinstatement, and fail all courses in their third semester before facing suspension for a semester. The policy also does not include parameters regarding course completion rates. For example, a student could withdraw from three of their

four courses, earn a B in their one remaining course, and never be placed on academic probation or warning. With a term GPA of 3.0, this student may appear to be academically successful. A student could do this for multiple cumulative semesters and never be identified as a student in potential academic distress.

These scenarios assume a student can afford to pay the full cost of tuition, room, and board for a third semester with no options for university, state, or federal aid or discount. University and federal financial aid policies outline minimum academic requirements for students to continue to receive need-based aid (including grants and loans). In order to retain any university, state, or federal aid, Elon students must be making Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) by the spring of each academic year. The Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Policy, included within the Higher Education Act (20 U.S.C. § 1091(d), 2021), outlines minimum academic requirements for students and universities to be eligible to receive federal financial aid. The policy requires that universities set standards and provide general parameters for academic progress but offers broad flexibility for universities to enact policies and procedures.

Elon's SAP policy (Elon University Financial Aid, 2023) requires that students earn a GPA of at least 1.7 by the end of the first academic year and complete at least 67% of attempted credits. Students at Elon typically take 36 credits (9 courses) during their first year. Students taking a normal load of courses would need to earn credit in at least six courses in order to make SAP by the end of their first year. Thus, it is impossible for students who fail all four of their courses during the fall semester to make SAP by the end of their first year. Under Elon's academic standing policy, a student who fails all courses (36 credits) during their first year would be eligible to appeal a first academic suspension and remain enrolled on continued probation into a third semester. That same student would not be eligible for continued financial

aid. In fact, students receiving need-based aid would be required to complete more than a year's worth of credits at another university in order to attain 67% completion and regain eligibility for Elon University need-based aid and federal aid. Federal, state, and institution financial aid processes involve a complicated and convoluted system of applications, documentation, grants, loans, scholarships and tax deductions. These processes and systems were built for traditional college-age students who would graduate from high school and transition from living with their parents to attending university full-time (Aschenbrener, 2016).

In recent years, staff in leadership roles have shown an increased awareness of equity, access, and inclusion. These staff have also demonstrated their commitment to making systemic changes. New leaders and staff in the KLC, financial aid, and student care and outreach had individually noticed systemic structures and processes that perpetuated inequity. For example, the person responsible for determining financial aid eligibility had wondered how much advisors were trained related to academic progress and financial aid. The answer, we learned from recent collaborative conversations, was none. Each director individually had noticed a problem and wanted to partner with others to create find solutions. By engaging partners in collaborative conversations, we were able to find that everyone saw a different part of the same problem, and want to come together to develop solutions. These allies have individual interests and professional stakes related to holistic support for students who are exhibiting academic distress. Though each director is located within a completely different university division, reporting structure, and physical area, each is highly-motivated to come together to contribute to deep, lasting changes.

My Role at the Institution

My current role as assistant dean of students has responsibilities for departments and functional areas that address student crises, student care and holistic support, student code of conduct and accountability processes, as well as special projects and initiatives to address out-of-class student experiences and needs. In the past seventeen years working at my institution, I have held five different positions and served on countless committees, task forces, and work groups.

Early in my tenure, I was asked to meet with students who had successfully appealed their academic suspension status and were eligible for continued enrollment. Of the four individuals serving in this role, I was the sole representative outside of academic affairs. I was the only person who did not hold a dean or provost position. There was no structure, curriculum, training, or information from student records. We were simply asked to meet with students three times to check-in and help keep them on track. Some students never responded to outreach. Others met with me dozens of times—often for coffee, lunch, or a walk.

I learned a lot from that experience. I learned from students who often felt ashamed and alone. I learned from staff in learning assistance who worked tirelessly to support students yet experienced disjointed systems and information silos. I learned from faculty who cared deeply about students but felt unprepared for conversations regarding financial, mental health, or family crises. I learned from financial aid administrators who were deeply saddened for the students who had lost eligibility to receive scholarships, grants, or loans—and would never return. As I spoke with colleagues, there was a clear shared desire to more effectively support students' academic recovery. The question was not *if* we should make changes, but rather *what* to do and *how* to do it.

A Causal Analysis

The purpose of the causal analysis section is to provide a comprehensive overview of the major factors that contributing to the problem of ineffective interventions for academic recovery

and retention. This section explores the historical context, major themes in the literature, significant findings from prior research, and aspects identified by stakeholders within the local context. The conceptual framework synthesizes findings in the literature and themes from the local context.

The Importance of Root Cause Analysis

A critical first step in accurately and deeply understanding a problem is to examine the system in which the problem exists (Bryk, et al., 2015). This process supports focus upon the root causes of the problem, rather than the symptoms or outcomes. Additionally, examination of the complex systems and specific organizational context ensures the researcher does not oversimplify the unique culture, relationships, policies, and practices that may influence the identified problem (Langley, et al., 2009). By utilizing specific protocols for systems analysis, we are better able to identify opportunities for meaningful improvement. In this section, I provide a causal analysis for the problem of insufficient support for students placed on academic probation.

The first step in the root cause analysis process was a review of the literature related to academic standing and academic recovery, with a focus on outcomes related to retention. Qualitative research utilizing case studies and phenomenology included detailed descriptions of student's experiences through academic standing and recovery processes. This provided a rich understanding of both the complex conditions contributing to academic struggle and recovery, as well as students' own interpretation and meaning-making of these processes and experiences. Literature on academic recovery programs and experiences of professional staff responsible for these initiatives highlighted systemic factors related to policies, resources, internal processes and communications, and intervention strategies. Quantitative studies highlighting inequities in

academic recovery and retention for students with underserved and marginalized identities, including black, Latinx, indigenous, first-generation, economically disadvantaged, and differently-abled students.

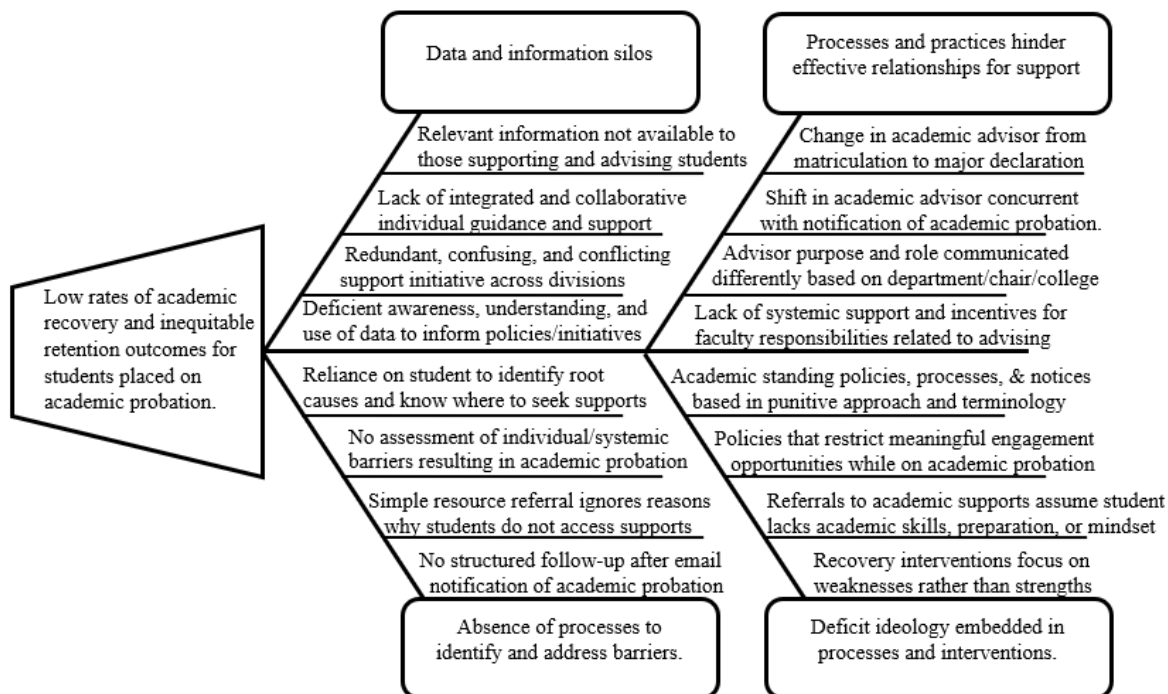
This analysis was also guided by stakeholder interviews and university design team input related to the problem in the local context. This information confirmed university conditions that align with trends in the national research, and also highlighted aspects not immediately evident in the research on academic standing and recovery. For example, the institutional systems and culture related to a student's assigned academic advisor was not a theme that arose in the literature related to academic standing and recovery. Yet this topic arose repeatedly in conversations with stakeholders. By gathering perspectives from multiple stakeholder groups, we are able to identify differences in assumptions related to the root causes, which informs next steps in data collection (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). These perspectives contribute to a more thorough and accurate understanding of the system in which the problem exists.

A Conceptual Framework of the Problem and Influential Causes

The Ishikawa diagram, also known as a “fishbone diagram,” creates a visual tool for identifying root causes of problems (the main “bones” or “branches”) and the symptoms that arise out of those root causes (the “smaller bones”). Though initially developed within the context of manufacturing and production, this exercise is relevant for complex educational organizations to explore pathways that lead to root causes (Hinnant Crawford, 2020, pp. 52-58). This diagram helps to highlight barriers and opportunities for change. By mapping contributing factors in a structured way, it facilitates deeper analysis and more targeted problem-solving strategies.

Figure 2

Fishbone Diagram



Barriers to Timely and Meaningful Data

The first major “bone” in this causal analysis involves a lack of timely and meaningful data available to those responsible for academic advising, support, and recovery processes. Though faculty and staff in these roles may have access to course registration information and final grades at the end of a semester, they rarely if ever have granular data to help guide effective intervention and support for a student. Virtually every office and aspect of university operations collect data, but the information is rarely shared in real-time nor available to those engaged in direct student support (Dowd, et al., 2018). This lack of close-to-practice data results in wider gaps in support and greater disparities in academic outcomes for students who hold marginalized identities (Dowd, et a., 2018, Joseph, 2023). While we have a legal and ethical imperative to

protect private and sensitive student data, we must have a similar imperative to utilize data in meaningful ways to support our students. Researchers acknowledged that, “handcrafted, small data are oftentimes needed when staff would like to direct resources to students who need them the most,” (Dowd, et al., 2018, p. 6) yet this data may be difficult or impossible to obtain due to storage in local systems, unnecessarily broad limits on access, or complicated and inefficient administrative processes for sharing data. Additionally, pressures related to funding and accreditation may drive universities to focus on the collection and analysis of big data (aggregate statistics, trend analysis, etc.) to the detriment of attention to small data (Kitchin & Lauriault, 2015).

Specific examples of data silos and ineffective data utilization within the local context include the Early Alert system, student Care Referrals, and financial aid information. The early alert system provides a platform for a course instructor to submit a concern for a student enrolled in their course. This alert triggers an email notice to the student and their current advisor. Support staff do not have access to these alerts. Thus, a student may not be attending class, but only the academic advisor would have access to this information. When the academic advisor changes, the new academic advisor does not have access to any prior early alert notices. The same professor may submit a concern for nonattendance via a Care Referral. Again, only Care & Outreach staff would have access to this information. Neither the academic advisor nor support staff in the KLC would know the referral was submitted or have access to any follow-up notes. Staff outside of financial aid, including those in the KLC and Student Care & Outreach, do not have access to information regarding financial aid packages. Thus, an academic advisor or support staff member would not know if specific advising guidance may result in ineligibility for a scholarship, grant, or even all federal, state, and institutional aid.

Hinnant-Crawford (2020) reminds us that universities are complex systems, with two major subsystems: academic affairs and student affairs. These two systems are, by design, run by different leaders with different priorities, policies, and practices (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p.97). It is also important to note the divisional and reporting structures that contribute to disconnected and siloed information. The simplified organization chart (Figure 1) shows that each of the three major stakeholder areas (learning center, care and outreach, and financial aid) report through different leaders in different divisions, with no central reporting other than the president of the university. Offices are located in different buildings, departments utilize different student management systems for storing and tracking student information, staff have no structured connections or communications, and relationships exist only to the extent which individuals seek to develop partnerships. leaders in different divisions. There is no standing committee, process, or structure that regularly brings these areas together. Thus, each area may be missing important information and awareness of the impact of various policies and processes on the other areas. Meadows (2008) asserts that interactions in complex systems occur all at one and in multiple directions (p. 5). These processes, experiences, and interactions are not just happening between the particular faculty, staff, or department and the student, but also in the interactions (intentional or unintentional) between the various policies, processes, and individuals in each of the departments.

Each department or individual may see their role as distinct. Faculty are responsible for teaching and grading course content; advisors instruct students on the requirements for degree attainment in specific major, minors; staff in the learning center are responsible for providing learning assistance in the form of academic tutoring and learning skills development; staff in financial aid determine an award package and eligibility for ongoing funding; staff in student

affairs are responsible for supporting belonging, involvement, personal wellness, and providing guidance and resources if personal crises arise. Each of these roles and interventions may operate independently, without intentional collaboration or integration. This leads to a greater likelihood of gaps in support for students.

A recent case study report from the University of South Florida (2023), highlighted how the combination of in-depth data analytics and information sharing across divisions, combined with increased resources dedicated to ongoing mentoring relationships, helped to substantially increase student academic recovery and retention. Through utilization of this model, the University of South Florida (USF) increased retention rates from 86% to almost 91% over a nine-year period (2023, p. 2). The report highlights the importance of caring staff members who are trained in university practices, processes, policies, and resources so they can provide student with expert guidance to work through barriers and connect with the right resources (University of South Florida, 2023, pp. 5-7). Perhaps most importantly, this guidance does not come in the form of automated template emails, but in personalized outreach and ongoing meetings to build understanding, openness, and trust.

Lack of Supportive Relationships

The second major causal factor is a lack of supportive relationships through the academic probation and recovery process. The most frequent for successful academic recovery is the involvement of an authentic, caring support person to provide a student with individualized guidance (Arcand & Le Blanc, 2012; Bledsoe, 2019; Capello, 2019; Robinson, 2019; Versalle, 2018). A variety of situations may result in the lack of supportive relationships in the broader university setting: staff burnout and turnover leading to vacancies in support positions, an advisor who see their role as transactional rather than relational, a staff member who expresses

deficit ideology in a workshop, a professor who engages in microaggressions (Capello, 2019; Lee, 2018; Robinson, 2019; Versalle, 2018). Research suggests students on academic probation are less likely to achieve academic recovery and persist when strategies do not include any in-person meetings, when there is a single face-to-face intervention, or when interventions occur with different people, such as attending workshops facilitated by different staff members (Clemons, 2019; McGrath & Burd, 2012; Swecker, et al., 2013). One study highlighted that students on academic probation who attended fewer meetings with an academic recovery advisor were less likely to persist than those who attended more meetings (Swecker, et al., 2013). Thus, the literature highlights causal factors related to both the quality of the relationship and the structure of the intervention.

Elon University's relationship-rich culture centers and values faculty-student interactions. Hiring and onboarding processes uplift the teacher/scholar role (as compared to other institutions that may elevate research above teaching). My experience has repeatedly affirmed that faculty genuinely care about teaching and about supporting student wellbeing and success. When faculty know a student and see the student struggling, they frequently contact the student and try to help. This organic and authentic model works extremely well for many students. Yet students with marginalized identities, those who are experiencing barriers for which there may be substantial social stigma, and those who are struggling with severe mental health concerns may be at a disadvantage when there is no formalized and structured intervention. Informal support systems that rely solely on human relationships will inherently perpetuate inequities and unconscious bias for some students exhibiting poor academic outcomes (Frink, 2021; Gorski, 2011). Additionally, interventions solely based on building academic strategies and those that do not incorporate

culturally-inclusive advising practices may fail to effectively identify and address the underlying concerns leading to academic distress (Bowes, 2017).

The systems, culture, processes, and practices associated with academic advising were the most common theme that arose in stakeholders interviews and design team conversations regarding root causes contributing to the problem. At Elon University, academic advisors fall into three categories: full-time professional academic advisors within the academic advising office, faculty and staff who serve as the academic advisor to incoming students until they declare a major, and faculty members who serve as advisors to students within their major/discipline. Elon University's advising model is unique and does not appear in the literature review related to advising and academic recovery. All incoming students are listed as undeclared until they are eligible to declare a major after the completion of their first semester.

Approximately 120 faculty and staff from across the university teach a transition strategies course and serve as the academic advisor for incoming students. Both the student and the advisor understand the relationship is temporary, as the student will have a different advisor once they declare a major. While this structure has many benefits, the transition between advisors was identified as having a negative impact on the quality of the relationship with the first advisor. Students who are placed on academic probation at the end of their first term and declare a major at this point are in an especially vulnerable situation. They may not interact with their new academic advisor until preregistration meetings occur months later. This transition of advisors may occur at the same time they receive notification of their academic standing. Thus, the advising model may negatively impact both the quality of the relationship with the first advisor, and a substantial gap in connection and support from their major advisor.

Another contributing factor for the lack of effective relationships relates to historical, national, and institutional value placed on the faculty responsibilities for academic advising. Advising is a small portion of a faculty or staff person's role, one that is not directly tied to evaluation, promotion, or tenure. A faculty colleague recently observed that he had spent approximately forty hours in the recent term to work with students who were struggling with personal and family difficulties. The time was spent providing compassionate response, discussing and developing course modifications, and working to connect students with the right resources. With these forty hours of time, he could have written and submitted an article for publication. He commented that an article submission would have been looked at much more favorably for his personal promotion and reputation, along with that of his department and university. Faculty and staff mentioned the academic advising role is, at best, an afterthought in department conversations. This role is rarely if ever directly discussed in student affairs department meetings, one-on-one meetings, and is not part of the annual performance appraisal process for staff. Similarly, academic department meetings typically do not include a focus on academic advising since part-time and adjunct faculty do not serve as academic advisors. Faculty academic advisors are not required to participate in workshops related to advising. Finally, the role and responsibilities of advisors are understood and implemented differently based on the school, the department, and the individual.

Holistic and intrusive advising are generally considered practices for professional advising staff, not for faculty members serving as academic advisors. Concerns outside the realm of degree progression and professional mentoring are generally seen as the work of staff in certain departments, namely counseling services, care and outreach, and learning assistance. Many faculty have shared discomfort and even fear at opening a conversation regarding any

personal struggles that may be impacting academic progress. Though the vast majority of faculty truly care about the holistic wellbeing of students, they are often unsure of wading into conversations that are outside their area of expertise, some concerned about saying or doing something “wrong.” Whether from lack of training and support, fear of creating harm, or feeling it is “not their job,” some faculty will simply not open the conversation. All of these factors contribute to the problem of ineffective relationships for support.

Missed Opportunities to Identify Barriers

The third major theme in the literature is the structure of the academic recovery program. Programs that lack any individualized or personalized interventions may fail to identify systemic barriers impacting student success (Versalle, 2018). For example, a program that focuses solely on study and test-taking skills may fail to address the real needs of a student who is missing class due to a lack of transportation or childcare. Finally, students are less likely to be successful when programs involve meetings with different people or offices, at different times, with no structured frequency or consistency (Sasso, et al., 2021). Though providing a variety of options—such as offering workshops on different topics—may seem like a way to create an individualized recovery plan, these types of programs typically do not provide effective supports for retention and success (Sneyers & De Witte, 2017).

Embedded Deficit Ideology

The fourth “bone” involves the manner in which universities philosophically frame academic standing policies and communicate with students. This includes the academic standing policy language, the tone and content of communications with students regarding the academic

probation status, as well as the myriad ways in which academic probation is perceived and implemented across campus.

The terminology used in academic standing policies may communicate a punitive status, rather than a restorative or supportive opportunity. The choice of words within policy language holds meaning and power. It is relevant to note the term “probation” is most commonly associated with criminal law and disciplinary systems in the US, as part of the punishment structure for one who has broken the law or violated a policy. Though administrators may not intend for this status to be punitive, universities are beginning to acknowledge the negative connotations of this term (Steele, 2022). In cases where students perceive the academic standing system to be punitive rather than supportive, they may be less likely to seek out resources or support services (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2011).

The content and context of communications regarding the academic standing policy is another factor within this causal area. Versalle (2018) identified a common theme that students did not fully understand or appreciate the academic probation process as a step towards dismissal, and did not seek to make changes to behaviors or circumstances (p. 87). Interviews with academic advising leaders revealed that advisors may struggle to understand complicated policies, resulting in a lack of effective guidance for students (Sasso, et al., 2021). Policies may appear neutral, but critical policy analysis reminds us to consider what voices were part of developing a policy, who benefits from the policy, and who was ignored or forgotten. Young and Diem (2017) remind us to look for the unspoken assumptions and unseen systems that contribute to a policy and result in policy winners and losers. Language that is overly complex or legalistic signals that a student voice and perspective was never included.

The ways in which academic standing policies are discussed and implemented within a specific campus culture are another sign of potential embedded deficit ideology. For example, students on academic probation are not eligible to hold certain leadership positions, student government roles, participate in experiences like study abroad, or join certain organizations such as sororities and fraternities. Though some of these restrictions *may* have developmental, supportive, or safety-related intentions, lack of any explanation contributes to the overarching implication that academic probation is a punitive status and the removal of privileges is part of the punishment.

The Improvement Initiative

Identifying, intervening, and effectively supporting students exhibiting academic struggle is a foundational imperative for institutions of higher education. Universities identify these students in variety of ways: early alert systems, mid-term assessments, final grades, and even self-reported referrals. Each of these strategies plays an important role as opportunities for outreach and offering supports. Yet one structure offers the benefit of pulling together patterns across multiple courses to identify those students most at-risk for non-retention: academic standing policies. This structure also allows the unique option of required interventions to support academic recovery and student success. These interventions must be implemented in ways that effectively connect students with the right guidance, resources, and supports to address underlying issues. While almost every college and university in the United States has an academic standing system, the associated policies, processes, and academic recovery structures vary widely.

In order to create meaningful, equity-based improvement initiatives, scholar-practitioners must partner with stakeholders to understand the problem and its causes, identify areas for

meaningful improvement, and co-create the design and plans for implementation of the initiative. Hinnant-Crawford (2020), describes the importance of authentic relationships and collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and participants:

Only through a process which intentionally harvests the collective wisdom of many and synthesizes the prophetic imagination of a wide array of stakeholders, can improvement scientists envision better and plot a course for how to get there. Harnessing the power of the collective is the essence of the first principle of improvement science (p. 43).

Literature Review of Possible Improvement Initiatives

A multitude of scholars have identified that a sense of *mattering* and *belonging* are critical for academic persistence and success. Researchers have focused upon the quantity and quality of involvement inside and outside the classroom (Astin, 1984), the type of quality of interpersonal relationships and impacts upon motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the importance of healthy interdependence and appreciation within relationships (Schlossberg, 1989), the ways in which a school's climate and culture influence a student's sense of belonging (Hurtado, 1997), and how these experiences, relationships, and resources influence a student's connection and persistence in a university setting (Tinto, 2006). Rayle and Chung (2007) found the most substantial predictor of academic stress was a lack of a sense of mattering to the college.

Though student sense of belonging and mattering are closely related, it is important to differentiate between these two concepts. Student sense of belonging is closely tied to alignment of one's own cultural identity with the culture of a specific environmental context (Allen, et al., 2021). For example, one would likely feel a deeper sense of belonging when customs, language, traditions, food, built spaces, and social identities other people in a certain environment more

closely align with one's own identities and experiences. Various measures of belonging also focus on ease or desire to form relationships, as well as general sense of inclusion and feeling welcomed in an environment (Mahar et al., 2014). Yet belonging may not be the goal for all students. Glessmer (2022) reflected that:

Belonging always includes an element of “fitting in” into a specific group of people or an institution. But there might be students who don't want to “fit in,” for example because of the history of a specific institution or their personal history, yet they still want to learn from that very institution. I, for example, did not participate in any of the student initiation rituals when I started university.

The concept of mattering intrinsically relates to the nature of relationships with other individuals. Sociologists Rosenberg and McCullough developed their theory of mattering in 1981. They described mattering as, “the feeling that others depend upon us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate” (p. 165). Their theory drew the connection between internal feelings and external behaviors: highlighting the link between mattering and motivation. Rosenberg & McCullough (1981) outlined three distinct elements that contribute to a sense of mattering. The first element is awareness. This involves feeling that one is noticed by another person or people. For example, when someone remembers our name or acknowledges when we are absent. The second element is importance. This relates to the belief that we are important to others. Importance is the feeling that others care about us, our wellbeing, and our successes. Dependence is the third element of mattering described by Rosenberg & McCullough (1981). Also referred to as reliance, this area involves feeling as if others depend on us and believing that we contribute something of value in our relationships others. This third element is closely tied to feelings of self-efficacy and agency. Thus, it is not simply the feeling that one is valued—but

that one's actions and contributions are valued. Through their work with adolescents, Rosenberg & McCullough found a stronger sense of mattering was highly positively correlated with motivation to engage in behaviors for positive outcomes within the community (pp.170-173).

Schlossberg (1989) built upon Rosenberg & McCullough's theory and applied it within the university setting. In particular, Schlossberg's theory of mattering and marginality (1989) described the particular importance of mattering within the context of two types of marginality: marginality related to *transitions* and a temporary feeling of being on the edges as one enters a new context; and marginality related to identity and the more permanent condition of feeling "other than" based on one's marginalized identities (pp. 6-7). In addition to Rosenberg & McCullough's three elements of mattering, Schlossberg's model includes a fourth element of appreciation, describing the nuance of feeling that actions and efforts were appreciated by others (p. 8). Schlossberg's work frequently focused on the transitional phase of students moving from high school to the university environment. Amongst other positive outcomes, Schlossberg found that a sense of mattering helped to keep students engaged in their learning (p. 9).

More recent research supports a sense of mattering is linked with positive psychological well-being and a reduction in negative outcomes related to mental health disorders (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Flett, 2022; Mohammed, 2023). Flett and his colleagues (2022) identified that a strong sense of mattering is positively correlated with higher self-efficacy, academic resiliency and grit, wellbeing, and overall student success. In one recent study, researchers found that strong of mattering was correlated with lower depressive symptoms for students with high levels of perfectionism (Mohammed, et al., 2023).

Mattering has been identified as an important protective factor for academic success and retention of students with underrepresented and marginalized identities. In interviews with

dozens of black, indigenous, or Latinx (BIL) students at predominately-white institutions, researchers found that students' academic motivation, persistence and success was built upon a sense of mattering specifically founded upon key mentoring relationships with faculty and staff (Cook-Sather, et al., 2023). The researchers found that students repeatedly described a strong sense of mattering not because of what they had in common with others at the institution, but rather from the feeling of personal value and affirmation they experienced through meaningful mentoring relationships. In one study (Rodney, 2022), high-achieving black men who graduated from very selective and historically white universities reported supportive relationships with mentors and advocates as instrumental to their persistence and academic success. Similarly, students who identify as LGBTQ report increased sense of mattering resulting from protective relationships (Blackmon, 2018). These relationships influenced students' sense of mattering and motivation to persist in spite of regular experiences of micro-aggressions and general lack of sense of belonging within the broader university culture.

Academic Advising

The concept of academic advising was first introduced in the 1870's as universities included elective course options and multiple curricular pathways towards graduation (Kuhn, 2008, p.4). Beginning in the 1970's, universities began to recognize and define academic advising as a specific set of responsibilities and a functional area, resulting in the first research articles and frameworks for academic advising. This increased awareness culminated in 1979 with the creation of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) (Kuhn, 2008, p. 7).

For many faculty and staff, academic advising is understood as a narrow set of responsibilities that comprise a tiny portion of their job description. This task is often a

requirement or expectation for university service. Faculty and staff are responsible for ensuring their designated group of advisees select and register for courses that meet university graduation and degree requirements. Occasionally, students may have questions regarding professional pathways or areas of concentration or specialization of coursework. These transactional interactions may be perceived as the start and finish of the academic advising role. Yet it is important to recognize that Academic Advising is a broad functional area of higher education and encompasses a complex set of skills, competencies, responsibilities, best practices, and expertise. Since academic recovery programs build upon a foundation of academic advising, it is critical to understand the foundations of this role.

Core Concepts, Values, and Competencies

In 2006, The National Association for Academic Advising (NACADA) developed their guiding document on the concept of academic advising. This conceptual framework builds upon three components: curriculum, student learning outcomes, and pedagogy (NACADA, 2006). The association describes seven core values of academic advising: caring, commitment, empowerment, inclusivity, integrity, professionalism, and respect (NACADA, 2017b). Finally, NACADA has developed a set of core competencies for academic advisors, grouped into three areas of conceptual, information, and relational competencies (NACADA, 2017a). While informational competencies are important for the fundamental expectation that advisors must be able to accurately convey key information to students, the conceptual and relational groups of competencies focus on the underlying values, epistemologies, and assumptions of advisors. The practices and skills outlined within these two areas are what make the difference between transactional exchanges and meaningful connections. Competencies such as, “understand how equitable and inclusive environments are created,” and, “communicate in an inclusive manner,”

(NACADA, 2017a) provide a starting point for advisors to consider identity, inclusion, equity, and intercultural competency. Yet newer models are emerging that are based in critical pedagogy and provide a pathway for greater inclusive excellence in advising. These newer models will be discussed in the following section.

Culturally Responsive Advising

Scholars have recently begun to develop models of academic advising that incorporate the advisor's self-reflection and awareness of their own identities and biases, as well as the ways in which they engage with students who hold marginalized identities (Bowes, 2017; Carnaje, 2016; Lee, 2018; Purgason, 2016; Virtue et al., 2023). These culturally responsive advising frameworks begin with an inward focus upon the advisor's personal journey towards critical consciousness. From there, models explore the outward practices that signal a commitment to equity and inclusion. Research highlights two overarching advising approaches that are particularly successful for supporting students with marginalized identities: proactive advising (often referred to as *intrusive advising*) and holistic advising (Bowes, 2017; Carnaje, 2016; Lee, 2018). Proactive advising involves regular outreach to students with check-ins and reminders, as well as early intervention at the first sign a student may be experiencing a barrier to success. An example would include calling a student following a second consecutive absence in a class, with the goal of opening a conversation. Holistic advising employs a multifaceted approach that takes into account the unique identities, financial situation, social connections, family dynamics, health status, and other personal characteristics of each student (Carnaje, 2016, pp. 40-41).

Moving deeper, researchers provide specific recommendations to guide academic advisors towards more culturally responsive strategies for engaging with students. These include affirming students' experiences and feelings of marginalization (Lee, 2018); supporting students

through intentional referrals and connections with culturally-relevant resources, courses, and spaces (Carnaje, 2016; Lee 2018; Virtue et al; 2023; Purgason, 2016); and demonstrating ongoing social-justice oriented advocacy for both the individual student and for marginalized students in general (Lee, 2018). For example, an advisor may assist an individual student to obtain an override into a specific History course that aligns with the student's cultural identities; while also advocating for more diverse course options that move beyond a Western European/Colonial focus. Researchers also highlighted the importance of engaging in regular counter-narratives, such as responding to deficit-based beliefs with clear asset-based practices and narratives (Virtue et al., 2023) or countering a campus culture permeated with micro-aggressions by practicing intentional daily *micro-affirmations* through clear words, actions, and visible symbols to promote belonging and inclusion for marginalized students (Lee, 2018).

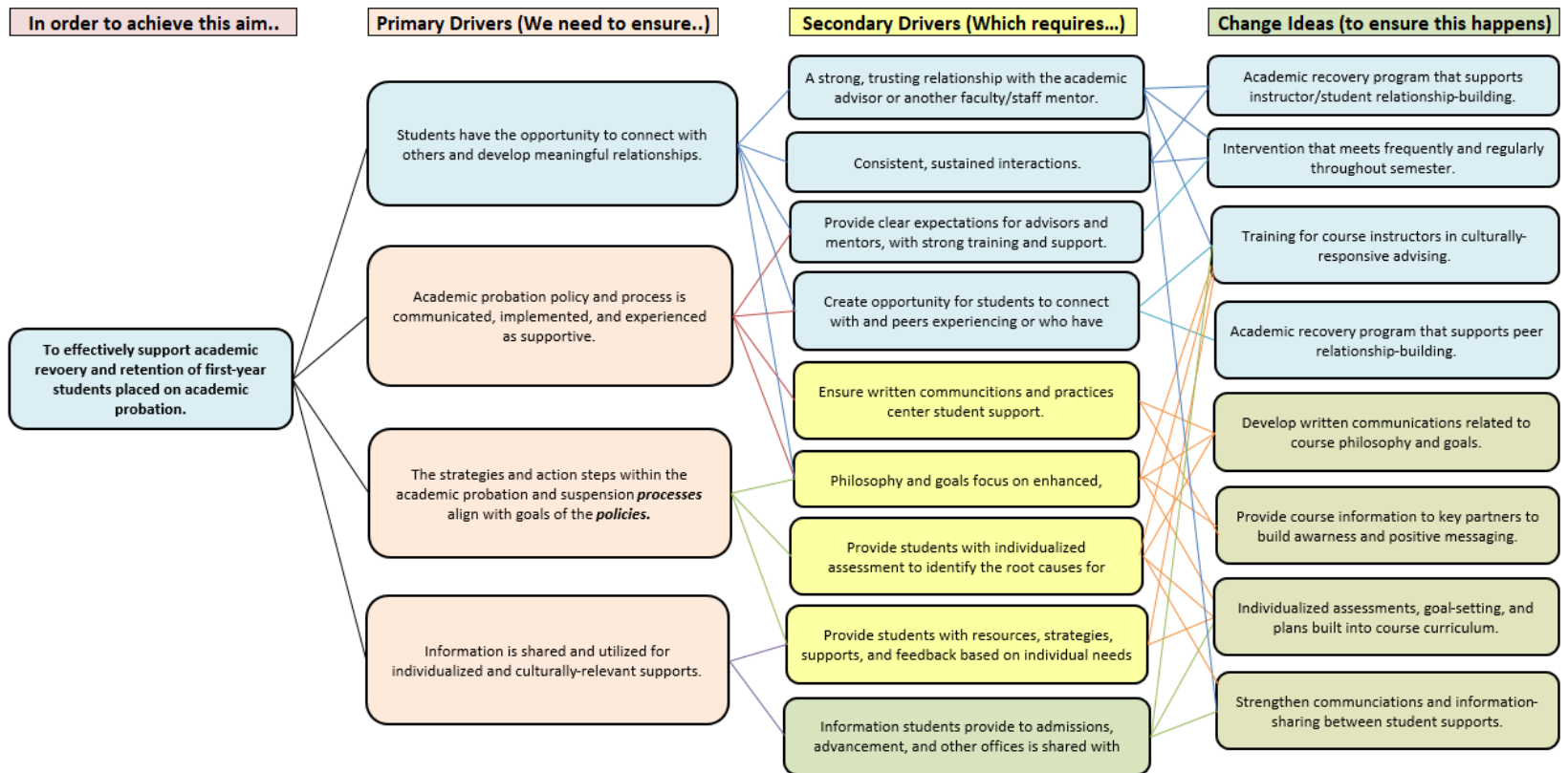
Universities must provide resources, training, time, and advising loads that allow academic advisors to engage in the practices necessary for culturally responsive advising. The ongoing work of self-reflection and awareness raising does not begin and end in an afternoon training session. Departments and supervisors must ensure advisors have ongoing opportunities for individual and group reflection and learning. Similarly, holistic and proactive advising approaches take substantially more time than transactional ones. Universities must recognize and plan for the time needed for this model of advising. In these ways, universities can move beyond academic advising models that perpetuate systems of privilege and marginalization. Culturally responsive advising provides a model to address the unique needs of each student while also shifting the campus culture towards equity and inclusion.

Driver Diagram and Theory of Improvement

A driver diagram provides a visual representation for the theory of change. It includes the ultimate goal or aim, the factors that must change within a specific context, and what leverage points exist to move towards achieving the aim. The driver diagram serves as a concept design to include the causes, theory, and specific interventions (Langley, et al., 2009, pp. 116-119). Building upon the causal analysis—this step moves from solely identifying the contributing factors of the problem to identifying research-informed steps and strategies for creating meaningful improvement. This tool is especially helpful in complex systems, such as universities, to encompass the various broad concepts (primary drivers) and smaller steps (secondary drivers) to address the myriad contributing factors to a problem.

Figure 3

Driver Diagram



Students admitted to a highly-selective university have already demonstrated the ability to be academically successful. What, then, causes these same students to not only struggle as they begin their transition to the university setting, but continue to struggle even after being placed on academic probation? Assumptions based in deficit-ideology would hold these students do not care about their academic endeavors, are not mature or intelligent enough to be successful, or are otherwise inappropriately prioritizing the social events and fun extracurricular experiences that exist within a residential university. Another common assumption is that these students do not know of the resources that exist and we simply need to increase knowledge and awareness of the myriad support services available.

My direct experiences with students on academic probation have consistently shown otherwise: these are young adults who desperately want to be academically successful, who know there are services, but who repeatedly voice that they do not feel that anyone truly sees them, cares for them, or depends upon them. This lack of mattering shows up as an apparent lack of motivation. “Why should I go to class if nobody notices when I am absent? Why should I participate if my contributions have no purpose? Why should I tell someone of the barriers I am facing if I don’t matter to them?” It takes only a tiny scratch below the surface to uncover and understand that what appears to be a *lack of caring* is more often a *lack of feeling cared about*. What appears to be a *lack of participation* is instead a *lack of feeling that one’s contributions hold value for others*. Thus, increased sense of mattering is not only critical for the intrinsic positive emotions and self-confidence associated with strong mattering, but for the increased academic motivation, self-efficacy, and trust that leads to academic recovery and persistence.

The *Equity-Based Framework of Support* (EFS) provides a conceptual model that integrates theory, practices, and mindset into a pedagogical framework for supporting student

academic success (Virtue, et al., 2023). The model highlights the importance of integrating theories of student development, culturally relevant pedagogy, and sense of belonging. These theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for developing programs, practices, and pedagogy to support student success. Though the framework is based broadly in theory around sense of belonging due to the scope of the framework for systems-level approaches, the sense of mattering fits well into this framework as a more focused theoretical approach for a specific improvement initiative that centers relationships.

Figure 4

An Equity-Based Framework of Support



The theoretical and practical aspects of the model informs the *what* and the *how* of interventions for supporting student academic success—what are we doing and how are we doing it. The EFS model then goes a step further to address the mindsets and beliefs of those developing and implementing interventions—requiring that we examine our beliefs and mindsets of the *why*. Why are students struggling in the first place? The model forces us to address the deficit-based beliefs we may carry with us regarding student failure. Narratives that students don't care. Or aren't working hard enough. Or just aren't smart enough. To truly support student academic success we must dismantle these assumptions, acknowledge the systems and barriers that have impeded student success, help remove those barriers and support students to build upon their strengths. This asset-based approach ensures we do not fall into unhelpful patterns of thinking that blame the student and see them as a problem to be fixed, but rather approach our work through practices and narratives that center student strengths.

My theory of improvement holds that *students on academic probation who complete an academic recovery course with a pedagogical foundation in mattering and culturally responsive advising will report increased sense of mattering, resulting in higher rates of academic recovery and retention*. This improvement initiatives involves the creation of a new course model, integration with the academic probation process and communications, development of course curriculum, training of course instructors in culturally-responsive advising, and regular meetings of course instructors to support continued development of advising practices. The theoretical model for my improvement research is Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering and Marginality (1989). Mattering Theory provides a model for relational practices and structures that reduce internal feelings of marginality, increase sense of mattering, resulting in lowered levels of

academic stress and enhanced academic motivation and persistence (Rayle & Chung, 2007; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989).

A central principle of improvement science is to be user centered, with an appreciation for the perspective and experience of the person at the heart of the intended improvement. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) reminds us that any theory of improvement requires sees the user through an asset-based lens and does not include deficit ideology within any of the phases (p.45). Thus, theories of improvement in higher education must focus on the university systems, processes, policies, and resources affecting the aim rather than placing blame, fault, or negative assumptions upon the student.

Frequently, students who have persisted and shown resilience through struggles share with me how much an individual or small group of university mentors provided the right guidance, information, or support at the right time. These students describe their mentor as someone who clearly cared about them, someone who saw them as a whole person, someone who made them feel seen and valued as a part of this community. Students share that it is the connection, the sense of being seen and mattering to someone, that makes the difference as they faced barriers that felt insurmountable at the time.

The Improvement Leadership Team

Design and Implementation Team

The design team for an improvement initiative provides expertise and perspective related to deeply understanding the system in which the project is occurring, and including voices of those involved and impacted—especially those whose voices have been missing in the past (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 165). The design team is comprised of individuals who serve as subject-matter experts, as well as those who are on the ground and closest to the work. The

design team for my improvement initiatives includes professional staff who are experts in teaching and learning strategies, student wellbeing, as well as the art and science of design thinking and collaborative project development. Design team members include:

Dr. James Holsinger – Dr. Holsinger (he/him) holds a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English. He currently serves as the executive director for the learning center and director of learning assistance at Elon University. Dr. Holsinger provides expertise regarding learning assistance resources, academic executive functioning skill-building, and course curriculum development related to academic strategy skill-building.

Dr. Jill McSweeney – Dr. McSweeney (she/her) holds a B.A. in psychology, a M.A. in Health Promotion, and a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in environmental health psychology. Dr. McSweeney serves as the associate director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning and Assistant Professor of Wellness. Dr. McSweeney's research includes education design and creating equitable learning environments. Dr. McSweeney provides expertise related to pedagogy and curriculum design.

Ms. Norma Rodriguez- Ms. Rodriguez (she/her) holds a M.A. in Higher Education Administration and serves as the assistant director for learning assistance within the student success center. She is the lead staff member for implementation of the learning and study strategies inventory (LASSI) and facilitation of reflection and goal-setting activities related to individualized feedback from the inventory. Ms. Rodriguez provides expertise on learning strategies, executive functioning coaching and skill-building, and valuable historical perspective on academic recovery initiatives, trends, and outcomes.

Student design team experts: Two students who were enrolled during the project design period and one student alum provided expert perspective and input related to their experience of academic distress, academic probation, and their process of academic recovery. The invaluable perspectives of these students provided critical understanding of the lived experiences of students facing...and overcoming... a multitude of barriers to their academic success.

I consulted with design team members frequently through the problem-identification phase, as well as the development of the improvement initiative. Design team members provided feedback on the pilot proposal (Appendix A), as well as collaborative development of the course syllabus (Appendix B).

My Positionality as a Practitioner

Acknowledging one's own positionality serves two important purposes for improvement work: first, it brings greater self-awareness of how life experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions may influence the way in which we approach the improvement project. By raising self-awareness, we are better able to assess and mitigate how our own lens may influence or bias our work individually and in relation to stakeholders. Secondly, positionality statements provide context and opportunity to understand the positionality of the researcher as others evaluate the project design, implementation, outcomes, and conclusions.

I am a straight, white, cisgender, upper-middle class woman. I was born into a family in which both parents graduated from university. My mother taught at a college. I am neuro-typical and able-bodied. These privileged identities have undoubtedly resulted in greater opportunity at every stage of my educational and professional journey. I was a “gifted and talented” kid—pulled out to spend special time with other “elite” students. I attended the university from which

both of my parents had graduated and at which several of their friends held positions of power and influence. I graduated magna cum laude.

My passion for addressing academic standing systems that fail to support students stems from my own experiences as a student—though perhaps not in the way one might assume. I have come to realize my successes are less a sign of my intelligence or motivation, and more an example of how systems work to the advantage of those who already hold privilege. When I was faced with a serious roommate conflict and unhealthy living environment, my family had the finances for me to move to a new apartment and continue to pay for the housing I wasn't using. When I struggled with my mental health and couldn't get out of bed in the mornings, I was able to move back to a safe and healthy home environment and commute to school for several months. My family's health insurance paid for excellent healthcare to address my needs. When I needed to quit my off-campus job, my parents had the money to give me an interest-free loan until I found another job that was a better fit for my schedule. I went to school in the right place, and the right time, and had the right resources to have a "safety net" during times of struggle. The system and resources worked for me. It was built for people like me.

I currently hold a professional position and title that brings the privileges of respect, influence, agency, and voice as well perceptions and assumptions of expertise and power. In almost every new meetings with a student who is failing their courses, they start by explaining their failure to show up or turn in any coursework is not because they do not care about the class. They assume I will judge them as lazy or apathetic. On the contrary, I encounter students with incredible resilience and intelligence. Students who are working hard to overcome so many challenges within a system that was not built for them. It is our job as leaders to listen, seek to understand the challenges, and work to rebuild the system.

As I engage in improvement work for and with students on the academic margins, it is important that I continue to focus upon the privilege that has been infused throughout my experiences. I realize my experience is just that: my own. I must continue understand the ongoing inequities that perpetuate oppression, lack of opportunity, and negative outcomes for those who hold underprivileged and marginalized identities. Many of these inequities exist within the very processes and resources that aim to support students. The resources that worked for me are not necessarily the same resources another person may need. They may not be created with that person in mind. Improvement planning must be undertaken with students at the heart of the conversation. Improvement actions must ensure the students at the margins are brought closer to the center. Improvement changes must not seek to simply look for a fix within the individual student—nor do so more quickly or efficiently. Improvement changes must truly see the problem and fix the system. This is what I aim to do.

Improvement Initiative Design and Implementation

Improvement science is a specific method of inquiry that seeks to create a positive change within an organization or system (Langley et al., 2009). The plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle creates a structure within improvement science that supports meaningful and continuous improvement. This framework moves ideas into action, action into learning, and learning into improvement. The *plan* stage includes both the change implementation plan, as well as the data collection plan. The development of an analysis plan and timeline is an essential component of the planning stage. Though a carefully-researched and collaboratively-developed improvement project has a stronger chance of addressing the root causes contributing to the problem, we cannot know our project is moving towards change unless we measure progress along the way. The *do* stage includes implementation of the plan, gathering data, and recording observations,

including things that were not part of the plan (Langley, et al, 2009, p. 98). *Study* includes intentional review of the data, observations, and results. Finally, the *act* stage includes continued improvement based on lessons learned from the first cycle. The act stage should inform changes to the plan, do, and study phases of the next cycle.

The methodology of improvement science involves seven distinct phases: 1) understanding and defining the problem and its root causes, 2) see the system that produces the problem, 3) establish an aim or goal, 4) develop a theory of improvement, 5) identify measures, 6) test changes and assess results, and 7) spread improvements (Bryk, et al., 2015). This process provides a framework for scholar-practitioners to develop, implement, and test ideas in order to create meaningful change.

Outcome Goals of the Improvement Initiative

The overarching goal of the improvement initiative is to effectively support academic recovery and retention of first-year students placed on academic probation. Intermediate outcomes include individual student improvements in sense of mattering and GPA (pre-intervention vs. post-intervention), academic standing, and retention (compared to past years). While any increase in GPA is a positive step for a student, the academic standing policy provides a key framework for differentiating academic *improvement* from *recovery*. For purposes of this study, academic recovery includes *good standing* (cumulative GPA of 2.0) or *continued probation* (term GPA above 2.0) at the end of the spring semester are considered to have achieved academic recovery. For example, a student who earns a fall GPA of 0.5 and a spring GPA of 0.8 is showing academic improvement—but is not yet demonstrating academic recovery. This highlights the importance of continued probation as a status indicating that a student is making sufficient progress towards good academic standing, degree completion, and graduation.

Effectively supporting academic recovery requires that we address the underlying individual and systemic barriers that impacted academic progress in the first place. By engaging in culturally responsive advising practices to reduce barriers and by focusing on cultivating meaningful relationships to build trust, self-efficacy, and sense of mattering, we strengthen foundations for long-term academic success.

The Improvement Work and Implementation Plan – Cycle One

The implementation plan provides an overview of the key components, steps, and timeline of the improvement project. A clear plan ensures fidelity to intervention design (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020), including intentional integration of the plan-do-study-act cycle.

The early steps of the improvement initiative included developing the course proposal, recruiting instructors, and designing the curriculum. These steps occurred within the local context, with input from the project design team and additional university stakeholders. Though specific curricular modules and activities were adjusted during course instruction, the course structure, learning outcomes, and relational strategies related to mattering were defined and refined in the fall of 2023.

The development, review, submission, and approval of the proposal for a graded, credit-bearing course involved multiple meetings with stakeholders in academic affairs and navigation of various university administrative processes. I provided a working draft of the proposal for feedback from key stakeholders in the academic learning center, office of the provost, and the academic standing committee. Following multiple meetings and incorporation of feedback to clarify course structure and learning outcomes, I submitted the proposal as a pilot experimental course. Experimental courses proposals are approved for up to three years, after which time the

course curriculum proposal must be submitted for full review by the university curriculum committee

Based on input from the implementation team and university stakeholders, the 1-credit course was scheduled for twice-weekly class times of 45-minutes (1.5 hours per week) for the entirety of the spring term. Instructors had flexibility and discretion to adjust to once-weekly group meetings during the second half of the semester. The second day of each week could be used for instructors to meet with either the full class or to schedule individual meetings with students. This plan aligned with accreditation and university guidelines for instructional hours. The combination of administrative enrollment and biweekly in-person class meetings are foundational to the theory of improvement and informed by multiple studies citing the importance of consistency and frequency of contact for relationship-building in academic recovery (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2011; Bledsoe, 2019; Sasso, et al., 2021). Table 2 outlines the major steps in the implementation timeline.

Table 2

PDSA Cycle One: Implementation Timeline

	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Aug
Design Team										
Curriculum Review	x		x							
Syllabus Review		x		x						
Recruitment of Instructors	x									
Implementation Team										
Section Scheduling			x							
Training				x						
Process Meetings					x	x	x	x	x	x
Project Implementation										
Intro. Email to Students			x							
Student Enrollment			x							
Email from Instructor				x						
Class meetings					x	x	x	x		
Measures										
Quantitative (pre-course)				x						

Survey (first/last week)					x			x		
Attendance Tracking					x	x	x	x		
Reflection Responses					x	x	x	x		
Quantitative (post-course)									x	
Retention										x

Instructor recruitment occurred as an iterative process, with outreach to key stakeholders and campus partners to share the pilot proposal (Appendix A) and encourage identification of faculty and staff with an interest in student success, mentoring and relationship-building, and with a demonstrated commitment to equity and inclusion. Three staff members and one faculty member agreed to serve as instructors for the first cycle pilot of the course. Three of the four instructors hold terminal degrees. One instructor serves in a senior university leadership position responsible for student retention and success. Another instructor is an expert in the field of teaching and learning, offering frequent trainings for faculty regarding successful teaching strategies and frequently contributing to scholarship related to inclusive pedagogy and course design. The third instructor is a professional staff member in the academic learning center, known for their commitment to student success and implementation of evidence-based strategies for learning assistance. The final instructor is a full-time faculty member whose research focuses on the role of belonging in student success.

During the fall semester, I partnered with design team members to develop course curriculum and pedagogical practices for course delivery. The course curriculum was designed with three major categories: academic strategies, wellness and wellbeing, and building meaningful relationships. The curriculum covered fifteen weeks with three-week cycles: every cycle included one week of focus on each of the three categories (see Appendix B). The first six weeks were highly-structured with a detailed facilitation guide for instructors. Instructors had flexibility to adjust the curricular topics and activities based on the needs of the students in the

course. Regardless of specific topics or activities, key pedagogical strategies for supporting sense of mattering remained the same: 1) all class sessions include opportunities for students to share about themselves or their experiences; 2) activities and assignments center interactions between students, with opportunities for students to offer one another input, feedback, or questions; and 3) instructors provide frequent and individualized affirmations, strengths-based feedback, and culturally-relevant resources and support. Flett et al. (2022) highlights mattering practices as a tool for improved academic performance, noting the specific importance of, “expressing genuine interest and empathy, including a stated awareness of what it means to be a student and the stressors they must contend with and balance” (p. 23).

Culturally-responsive strategies were intentionally embedded within initial course communications, instructor training, and course curriculum. Researchers have identified that mattering is of particular importance for students with underrepresented identities and serves as a protective factor for greater sense of belonging and persistence (Bowes, 2017; Felton & Lambert, 2020; Gentile & Budzilowicz, 2022). During instructor training, substantial time was devoted to describing specific curricular activities and culturally-responsive facilitation strategies. For example, instructors were provided with guidance and examples for developing a personal introduction that went beyond their institutional position, title, and CV—acknowledging their own identities and how these may have contributed to greater or lesser comfort and ease of transition in their own college experiences. Curricular activities were intentionally designed to center student interactions—which aligns with strategies for mattering and culturally-responsive pedagogy. Gentile and Budzilowicz (2022) note that interactive learning is beneficial for all students and of particular importance for students whose cultural backgrounds center learning through oral traditions and storytelling, reminding us that, “making learning social builds on

diverse students' communal orientation. We should organize learning such that students rely on each other" (p. 36).

Another key aspect of course structure and design was the decision to format all coursework and assignments as in-class experiences. Students had no out-of-class readings, written assignments or projects. This structure was consistent across all sections and was intended to focus and center learning as a relational and interactive process. Class sessions and modules generally followed a pattern consisting of four parts: 1) short lecture and review of information, 2) individual or paired activity for applied learning, 3) group share-out, and then 4) discussion or Q&A time to deepen learning from one another. This structure was informed by research on pedagogies and practices to based in sense of mattering and cultural responsiveness (Flett, et al., 2022; Gentile & Budzilowicz, 2022; Perguson, et al., 2016).

Based on the research regarding student experiences of being placed on academic probation, I knew that careful messaging and communications regarding the course was critical. Though initial plans included communication to students during the winter break in December, prior to the start of the winter term in January, input from university stakeholders resulted in a change in communication timeline and shift to course communications following the start of the winter term. This change in communication timeline was made based on request from university stakeholders due to concerns for student and family questions and capacity for staff to be able to respond prior to the holiday break. Following return from winter break and at the start of the university winter term in January (*J-term*) I emailed all eligible first-year students to describe the course goals and structure and explain we would administratively enroll them in a course section that aligned with their spring schedule.

The researcher sent the first email communication to students on the first day of the winter term (see Appendix F). Following the initial communication, the researcher reviewed the spring course schedule for each eligible student and developed course rosters that aligned with current schedules and enrollment. This was a manual process, with multiple versions and edits to develop four course rosters with similar numbers of students in each. It is also important to note that no students responded to indicate work commitments or other scheduling conflicts outside of their enrolled courses. Regardless, the researcher intentionally developed course rosters and schedules to ensure the academic recovery course would occur at a time between other enrolled courses, reducing the potential for conflicts with work or family commitments. The researcher then sent a second email communication with notification regarding course enrollment (see appendix G).

During the third week of the winter term, the four course instructors each sent an email to the students in their section. This email included a personalized introduction of the instructor and directions for response to confirm participation in the course. The goal in these communications was for instructors to begin modeling a welcoming and supportive course experience. This included the option for students to indicate if the course time conflicted with other life commitments, and to request enrollment in a different section. Students who did not respond to confirm participation received a personalized follow-up message. One student responded to request a move to another section based on preference for a specific instructor due to a pre-existing academic support relationship. No students responded to indicate need for a course section change due to work or other schedule conflicts.

A total of fifty-four students were registered and placed into one of four available sections. Ten students dropped the course prior to the end of the add-drop period, one week into

classes. Several of these students dropped prior to the start of the class, some attended one class and decided for various reasons to drop. Two students did not attend class, respond to emails or phone calls, and did not drop the course on their own. The researcher made the decision to request a special administrative drop for these two students, to avoid a withdrawal (W) on their transcript and the associated implications for financial aid eligibility. Following the end of the add/drop period, a total of forty-two students remained enrolled in the course. During the semester, an additional eleven students withdrew from the course or ceased attending. Thirty-one students completed the course.

The first class session was intentionally designed to begin building trust and connection between students in the course. Instructors were provided with detailed directions for facilitating activities in the first class with a focus on story-telling and experience-sharing – strategies based in mattering and culturally-responsive pedagogy. This included an overview of the course goals and an instructor introduction. Instructors each developed an introduction that included information about their interests, personal/cultural background, and a personal story related to a past struggle or challenge. Students then completed an activity involving working together to achieve a shared goal. The activity incorporates personal responses and experiences of each student. The instructor debrief includes opportunities to highlight and affirm students' choices, behaviors, and contributions during the activity. Flett et al. (2022) notes that successful practices that support student sense of mattering incorporate each of the four constructs of awareness, importance, reliance, and appreciation.

Building on existing resources and partnerships with our learning center, the curriculum for academic strategies was based on the elements of the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI; Weinstein, Palmer, & Acee, 2006). The LASSI is an online assessment with

ten scales related to various academic strategies. Learning center staff administered the assessment to students in each of the four course sections and facilitated a debrief of results. Students received assessment results along with an individualized plan and the option to complete online activities related to specific growth areas. The LASSI model served as the foundation for subsequent class sessions focused on the topic of academic strategies.

The curricular focus on wellness and wellbeing topics was framed by the university HealthEU initiative and the six dimensions of wellbeing. Utilizing an activity developed and researched by our center for design thinking, students reflected upon their current wellbeing, identified wellness practices, developed goals, and collaboratively generated actionable strategies for enhancing wellbeing. This was another example of an intentional curricular and strategy based in mattering and culturally-responsive pedagogy—providing students with an opportunity to reflect on how their own identities and experiences inform their personal concept of health and wellbeing. The activities centered students engaging with one another, providing ideas and feedback from their own experiences. Students then had opportunities to practice, assess, and adjust their plan in future cycles of the course curriculum.

The third curriculum category involved building and strengthening meaningful relationships. Topics and activities were drawn from *Connections are everything: a college student's guide to relationship-rich education* (Felton, et al., 2023). Authored by current and recent faculty and staff at Elon University, including the former president of the institution, this book serves as a guide for students to connect with peers, faculty, and staff. Each chapter of the text includes a topic, questions for self-reflection, and a list of specific activities for students to practice the particular relational skill or focus area. Students had the opportunity to select specific readings and relationship-building activities based on their own experiences, identities,

goals, and comfort level. This personalized structure honors and supports students unique learning styles, a central aspect of culturally-responsive pedagogy (Bowes, 2017; Carnaje, 2016; Gentile & Budzilowicz, 2022). This particular text was selected based on the authors' expertise and research related to sense of mattering, the practical nature of the text, as well as the dozens of examples specific to the local context. Finally, the full text of the book and all related activities are available as a free digital version, ensuring this was an accessible and no-cost course text for enrolled students.

Barriers to Implementation

The improvement initiative included processes that created substantial logistical challenges, but these steps were central to addressing and problem. The process of enrolling students on academic probation into one of the four available sections required manual review of current academic schedules and individual enrollment into a section that aligns with the spring schedule already in place. Further complicating this work was the potential that students may need to make changes to their spring schedules due to failing fall courses. This required ongoing communication and individualized solution-finding with both students enrolled in the program, as well as campus stakeholders responsible for the administrative steps of course enrollment. Though course sections were intentionally scheduled on different days and at different times in order to maximize the potential for all eligible students to be enrolled, some students had scheduling conflicts that made it difficult or impossible for them to participate in any of the offered sections. The design team proposed contacting those students to explain the program goals and the option for students to make changes to their course schedule in order to remove course schedule conflicts.

Evaluating the Improvement Initiative

Improvement Science for the Evaluation of Improvement

Improvement science employs a methodological framework to guide interventions within current initiatives (Bryk, et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). This is distinct from traditional research measurement, which may create models and theories to explain the cause and effect of a phenomenon but does not attempt to influence or change the outcome as a part of the research process (Hinnant-Crawford, 2022). Thus, a central component of improvement science involves *iterative cycles* with *small tests* to inform continuous improvement. These methods are part of the ongoing learning process within the PDSA cycle.

Though various models exist for project assessment and evaluation, the PDSA framework incorporates five key principles: 1) iterative cycles, 2) prediction-based test of change, 3) small-scale testing, 4) use of data over time, and 5) documentation (Taylor, et al., 2014). The principles are critical for identifying what aspects of a current initiative are effective and contributing to positive change, and what aspects may be ineffective or even detrimental to intended outcomes. The PDSA cycle supports scholar-practitioners to make real-time adjustments and to be nimble in our work.

This model is particularly valuable for interventions within the higher education on context, in which we often have a single academic term—fifteen weeks—to implement an improvement project for a specific cohort of students. Rather than waiting until the end of a semester to determine if an initiative created positive change, small-scale testing throughout the term provides invaluable data for timely adjustments. This data must be analyzed promptly to inform change and accelerate improvement. Finally, testing must seek to measure not only if an improvement is occurring, but also what factors or conditions are contributing to the results.

Data Collection and Analysis

Practical Measures

Improvement science relies on practical measurement. Practical measures operationalize the theory of improvement, creating clear check-points to determine if the improvement project is being implemented as intended and if progress is occurring (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, pp. 138-140). This type of testing, embedded within the improvement plan and process, is critical for connecting theory to practice. Practical measurement includes four distinct categories: driver, process, outcome, and balance measures.

The analysis plan provides a detailed overview of the specific information collected for each of the measures, the instrument or source of data, collection timeline, and data analysis procedure. The PDSA cycle and input from the design and implementation teams informed changes to the analysis plan at multiple points during the improvement project. The initial proposal plan (Table 3), Cycle One plan (Table 4), and Cycle Two plan (Table 5) show these changes.

Table 3

Cycle One Analysis Plan (proposed)

Improvement Science Measure	What Inquiry question does this measure answer? What does the data collected from this measure tell us about our improvement initiative?	Who am I collecting this data from?	What type of data collection tool will I use to collect this data?	What type of data will I collect from this measure?	When will I collect this data?	How will I analyze this data?	When will I analyze this data?
Outcome:							
Fall-Spring Term GPA	Does successful course completion improve academic recovery? Shows any increased GPA (fall to spring) and increased rates of Pace and Retention.	University records (w/ student permission)	University Records	Quantitative	May 2024	Comparison of aggregate rates of academic recovery and retention for eligible students	June-July & Sept-Oct 2024
Fall-Spring SAP Pace					Sept. 2024		
Fall-Spring Cum GPA					(after census)		
Fall Retention Rates							
Sense of Mattering	Is strong sense of mattering associated with academic recovery & retention?	Student & University Records	Qualtrics	Quantitative	Week 15	Pearson's Correlation	June-July
Driver:							
Self-Report Grades	Are student grades demonstrating academic recovery?	Student	Moodle Submit	Quantitative	Week 4 & 12	Dependent means t-test	Monthly
Mid-Term Grades	Are student grades demonstrating academic recovery?	Records	University Records		After posting on 03/19		March
Sense of Mattering	Is sense of mattering increasing?	Student	Qualtrics		Week 4 & 12		Monthly
Process:							

Attendance	Are students attending class?	Instructor	Attendance Chart	Quantitative	Weekly	Trend Analysis	Monthly
Assignment Completion	Are students completing curriculum?	Student	Assignment Completion (Y/N)	Quantitative	Weekly	Trend Analysis and Descriptive Analysis	Monthly
Instructor Reflection	Are instructors following curriculum?	Instructor	Interview Questions	Qualitative	Week 3, 6, 9, and 12	In Vivo & Pattern Analysis	Monthly
Balance:							
Student Feedback-	Is the course resulting in unintended/ negative outcomes for students?	Student	Researcher-developed question: Qualtrics	Qualitative	Week 4, 12, 15	In Vivo & Pattern Analysis	February, March, and July
Instructor Feedback	Is the course resulting in unintended/negative outcomes for instructors	Instructor	Interview Questions	Qualitative	Week 3, 6, 9, and 12	In Vivo Analysis	Monthly
Course grade lower Spring GPA/Pace	Did student's participation and grade in Academic Recovery Course lower their Spring GPA?	Student	University Records	Quantitative	May 2024	Descriptive Analysis	June-July 2024

Table 4*Cycle One Analysis Plan (adopted)*

Type of Measure	Purpose/Goal/Aim	Type of Data Collected	Frequency/Timing	Analysis Strategy
Outcome	Improved academic recovery rates for first-year students placed on Academic Probation	Quantitative- Fall Term, Spring Term, and Cumulative GPA	May 2024	Comparison of aggregate rates of academic recovery following posting of final grades
Outcome	Increased rates of retention from first year to sophomore year	Fall Retention Rates	Sept. 2024 (after census)	Comparison of aggregate rate of retention
Outcome	Increased sense of mattering at end of term compared to first week	Quantitative- Qualtrics	Week 15	Pearson's Correlation
Driver	Reduction in barriers impacting academic success	Qualitative	Week 4 & 12	In-Vivo Analysis
Driver	Mid-term grades demonstrating improvement	Quantitative- University Records	After posting on 03/19	Descriptive Statistics
Driver	Increasing sense of mattering	Quantitative- Qualtrics	Week 4 & 12	Dependent means t-test
Process	Students are attending class	Attendance Chart	Weekly	Trend Analysis
Process	Students are completing assignments	Quantitative- Assignment Completion (Y/N)	Weekly	Trend Analysis and Descriptive Analysis
Process	Instructors are implementing curriculum	Interview Questions	Week 3, 6, 9, and 12	In Vivo & Pattern Analysis
Balance	University Enrollment and Completion Trends	Quantitative- University Enrollment Records	Pre-course and May 2024	Descriptive Analysis
Balance	Unintended or negative outcomes for students	Researcher-developed question: Qualtrics	Week 4, 12, 15	In Vivo & Pattern Analysis
Balance	Unintended or negative outcomes for instructors	Interview Questions	Week 3, 6, 9, and 12	In Vivo Analysis
Balance	Course grade impact on Spring GPA	Quantitative- University Records	May 2024	Descriptive Analysis

Driver Measures

Hinnant-Crawford (2020) reminds us we must define driver measures to help scholar-practitioners determine if the project is moving in the right direction. Driver measures provide data to inform whether an improvement is occurring while the initiative is ongoing. Driver measures for the improvement initiative include two major areas of focus: 1) are participants' grades improving and 2) is sense of mattering increasing?

As part of recovery course activities, students completed a self-assessment including self-reported course grades at the conclusion of week four and twelve of the spring semester. Mid-term grades were reviewed in week eight. Grades were analyzed via descriptive and trend analysis in week five, eight, and twelve to determine rates of academic recovery progress. By gathering grade information at multiple points during the term, we were able to see if students were on-track to achieve academic good standing.

In the first week of the course, enrolled students were sent a survey (Appendix C) to gather information on barriers that impacted fall semester academic progress, as well as self-reported sense of mattering scale. A similar survey (Appendix D) was administered at the fourth and twelfth week of class. The scale provided to students is the Unified Measure of University Mattering instrument (France, 2011). The mattering scale was analyzed using a dependent means t-test. The open-ended questions were analyzed using In Vivo coding and Pattern Coding. In Vivo coding is particularly useful for "studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106).

I reviewed multiple instruments related to mattering, including the College Mattering Inventory (Tovar, et al., 2009), the Mattering in Domains of Life scale (Scarpa, 2022), and the General Mattering Scale (Rosenberg, 1981). The Unified Measure of University Mattering (UMUM) offers a focused set of sixteen questions, compared to longer scales of over sixty

questions. The language and the university-specific context offered by the UMUM scale was determined to be most relevant for the improvement initiative.

Process Measures

Process measures determine if the project is being implemented as designed and intended. These measures of fidelity highlight any deviation from the planned project design. With four sections of the academic recovery course taught by four different instructors, it is particularly important for process measures to highlight any variances in implementation. Students completed and submitted weekly assignments. Trend analysis of assignment completion (yes/no) provided data regarding fidelity to curriculum. Instructors took attendance at each course. Attendance was analyzed utilizing a run chart. Finally, instructors participated in a brief discussion every three weeks to describe any variance in curriculum or implementation and personal observations regarding recovery course implementation this would allow curriculum to be adjusted based on the process measures.

Balance Measures

Balance measures provide important understanding of any unintended outcomes or impacts that should be addressed and mitigated in future cycles (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The design team paid careful attention to the development and implementation of the improvement initiative to attempt to reduce unintended negative consequences. These considerations are discussed in detail in the prior section on challenges and mitigation strategies.

The first major balance measure included analysis of whether the course implemented design provided access and opportunity for students placed on academic probation to participate. Based on the academic calendar and the implementation design, the course was offered during the spring semester. University enrollment data for first-year students placed on probation was

analyzed using descriptive analytics to highlight trends for students who ended their university enrollment either before the course began or during the spring semester. This provides valuable data to inform future plans for course implementation timelines.

Due to the nature of student participation (auto-enrollment, graded course), it is particularly important to carefully and frequently gather information regarding any potential negative outcomes related to participation. Students had the opportunity to provide feedback as part of surveys delivered in weeks four, twelve, and fifteen (Appendix C and D). Additionally, spring semester final grades were evaluated to determine if a student's grade in the recovery course negatively impacted their GPA or pace of completion.

In addition to considering unintended consequences for students, it is important for scholar-practitioners to consider any broader impacts on other stakeholders and the system as a whole. For example, if instructors or others involved in administrative processes have a negative experience, or feel their time was not valued and well-utilized, they may not support the initiative moving forward. Feedback was gathered from instructors via group discussions at the middle and end of the course in order to identify any negative outcomes or impact on other work

Outcome Measures

The aim of the improvement initiative is to effectively support academic recovery and retention for first-year students placed on academic probation. Outcome measures tell us if the improvement initiative worked and if the goal was ultimately achieved. Outcome measures include spring semester GPA, cumulative GPA, academic standing, and retention rates for the subsequent fall semester. The percentage of eligible students who achieve continued probation or good standing at the conclusion of spring 2024 was compared with rates for previous years to determine if aggregate rates of academic recovery have improved. This data was collected and

analyzed following the posting of final grades in May. To determine if sense of mattering is associated with increased academic recovery, a correlation test was used to compare strong sense of mattering with academic outcomes. Finally, the rates of fall return for this population were compared to past trends using an independent means t-test. This data was gathered and analyzed following the fall semester census date. Retention rates demonstrate that students not only improved their grades but also retained their opportunity to continue their education at a prestigious university. While increases in grades and mattering are important, retention and persistence are ultimately the most critical factors to support graduation and the myriad socio-economic benefits associated with a college degree.

Results and Findings

The overarching goal of this improvement project was to improve academic recovery and retention rates for first-year students placed on Academic Probation. The theory of improvement highlighted the primary drivers for change and informed the development of change ideas. Through the improvement science process, these change ideas were further refined and coalesced into an academic recovery course with pedagogical foundations in mattering and culturally-responsive advising. This section describes the results of each of the four practical measures, findings and conclusions, and how these data were utilized as part of the PDSA model to inform changes within each cycle.

PDSA Cycle One – Spring 2024

Driver Measures

Students enrolled in the academic recovery course were asked to complete anonymous self-assessments via a Qualtrics in-course survey during weeks one, five, twelve, and the final week of the course (Appendix C-E). These surveys included multiple driver measures to

determine if the course was creating a positive change. The three driver measures included: 1) self-reported sense of mattering, 2) reduction in barriers impacting academic progress, and 3) self-reported grades in spring semester courses.

Participants

Participants included fifty-four students enrolled in an academic recovery course. Enrolled students were first-year students who had been placed on academic probation at the conclusion of fall semester. Of the fifty-four students, forty-three remained enrolled following the drop-add period and thirty-nine students completed at least one of the four anonymous in-course survey. Surveys included demographic information questions related to race, gender, and family income (Table 5).

Table 5

Survey Participants

Variable	Response (<i>n</i> = 39)
Race/Ethnicity	
Asian or Asian American	4
Black or African American	2
Hispanic or Latinx	6
Middle Eastern or North African	1
My race/ethnicity is best described as	1
White or European	25
Gender	
Man	23
Non-binary/Genderfluid	2
Woman	14
Estimated Family Income	
\$0 - \$49,999	2
\$50,000 - \$99,999	2
\$100,000 - \$149,999	10
\$200,000 – above	14
Prefer not to disclose	11

Driver Measure Results & Findings

All four anonymous surveys included questions based on the Unified Measure of University Mattering scale (France, 2011). This fifteen-question instrument measures student sense of mattering within each of the four elements: awareness, importance, ego-extension, and reliance. Students respond to questions on a six-point scale, with a six indicative of a very strong sense of mattering and one reflecting very low sense of mattering. Responses of 1.0-3.0 represent a low sense of mattering; a mean score of 3.01-4.49 reflects moderate sense of mattering, and 4.5-6.0 is indicative of strong sense of mattering.

Figure 5

Mattering Survey Responses

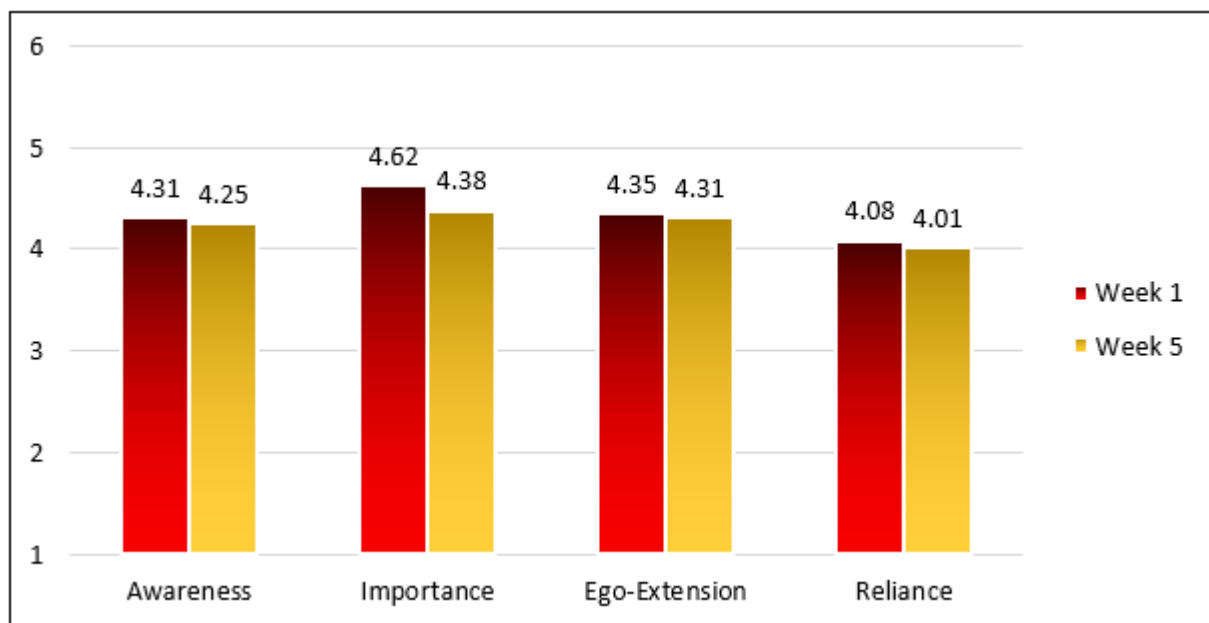


Figure five represents student responses to the in-class survey delivered during week one and week five of the spring semester. Of forty-three enrolled students, thirty-four completed the baseline survey in the first week. Week one student responses reflect a mean sense of mattering score of 4.34. This represents an overall moderate sense of mattering, with students reporting

strongest sense of mattering within the element of importance (4.62), demonstrating that students generally felt that others at the university cared about them and their wellbeing. The lowest scores were within the area of reliance ($M = 4.08$). This element relates to students feeling that others depend upon them and that they contribute something of value to their relationships. The response range for week one was 2-6 within awareness and importance, and 1-6 within ego-extension and reliance. Twenty-eight students completed the mattering scale in week five. The mean sense of mattering score dropped from 4.34 to 4.24. Mean sense of mattering in all four categories showed a slight drop, though this was not statistically significant change in any area. The overall sense of mattering for the group of students remained in the moderate range. The response range for week five was 1-6 in all categories. In week twelve, only nine students completed the survey. The mean sense of mattering dropped to 4.01.

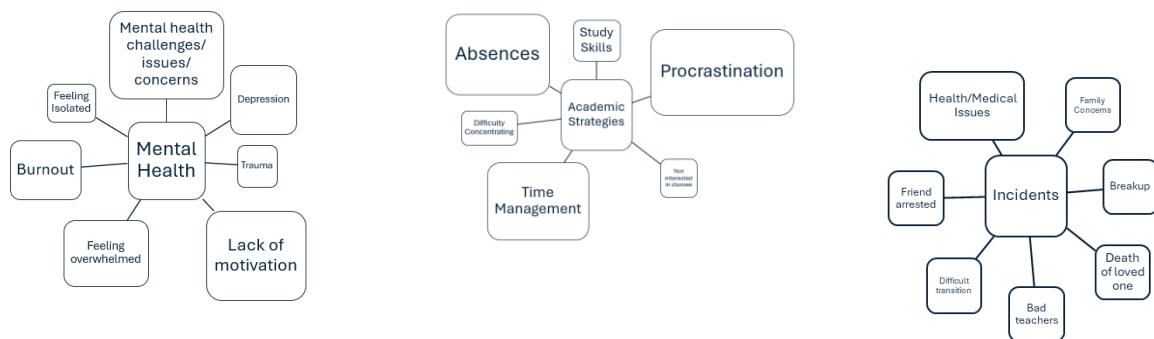
Qualitative responses from students who completed the course provide deeper insight into themes related to sense of mattering. In the final week of class, fourteen students completed at least some portion of the final survey. Respondents were primarily from two of the four sections, with only one respondent in the third section, and none from the fourth. Open-ended questions were coded utilizing In Vivo analysis and Pattern analysis. Several students included comments related to feeling seen or valued. One student wrote, “[This course] gave me someone who would at least email me about missing classes.” Another student provided feedback that, “Checking in with us one-on-one was very helpful.” Students described a sense that someone cared and wanted to help them, such as the student who wrote, “[The instructor] helped me make sure I stay on top of my work and not fall behind.” One particular poignant response came from a student with multiple underrepresented identities, who shared, “[The instructor] provided me

with the resources I needed to jump over any obstacle and make sure my voice is heard. This class has helped improve my commitment to this institution.”

In week one, students were asked to reflect back upon the fall term and share concerns or experiences that negatively impacted their academic progress thirty-four students completed the open-ended questions. Responses to open-ended questions for all surveys were coded utilizing in vivo coding for first cycle coding and pattern coding to identify emerging themes between responses. Students reported three major categories of concerns impacting academic progress: 1) mental health concerns and disorders (22 responses), 2) academic skills and strategies (21), and 3) serious incidents such as injury, major illness, loss, and trauma (17 responses). Figure 6 depicts the three major themes and sub-themes that arose from student responses. This data provided baseline information for instructors to develop course activities and topics within the curriculum to address individual and systemic barriers to success.

Figure 6

Factors Impacting Academic Progress



Survey responses in week five provided rich qualitative data regarding course impact on identified barriers to success. Twenty-nine students responded to week five survey questions related to concerns the course helped to improve. Responses were coded using in vivo analysis to explore individual salient experiences and then pattern analysis to identify commonalities between responses. Two major themes arose from responses: developing academic strategies and relational support. The most frequently-described area the course helped to improve was time-management (n = 14), followed by study and organization skills (n = 6), and strategies to reduce procrastination (n = 4). Students also described the relational and emotional support they received from the course:

“This course provided comfort in the fact that I am not the only one struggling.”

“[The course] fostered a comfortable community where we hold each other accountable.”

“It helped me feel better about my academic situation & makes me feel less worried about it.”

“This course has helped me overcome some of my challenges and have a better mindset.”

“The class helped me with feeling less isolated.”

The week five survey also provided an opportunity for students to share barriers to success they were still experiencing, which the course had not yet helped to address. Nine students responded to this question, with the responses including motivation (n = 4), focus/concentration (n = 2), mental health (n = 1), balancing academic and social life (n = 1), and making money (n = 1). Aggregate responses were provided to instructors in week six for additional focus in course instruction and activities. Though recovery course curriculum included a focus on wellbeing strategies and information regarding mental health resources, survey

responses point toward an opportunity for more effective strategies to help students access these supports.

Students self-reported their estimated current term GPA as part of the surveys in week five and week twelve. Students received directions for locating current course grades via the university learning management system and utilizing an online GPA calculator. Twenty-six students responded in week five (Table 6).

Table 6

Estimated Current GPA

Range	Week 5 Response (<i>n</i> = 26)	Week 12 Response (<i>n</i> = 10)
0.0-0.9	0	0
1.0-1.49	4	0
1.5-1.99	0	0
2.0-2.49	3	2
2.5-2.99	4	5
3.0-4.0	11	2
I don't know	4	1

Responses indicated an overall improvement compared to fall semester, though four students listed a current spring term GPA below 2.1. A final spring term GPA of 2.0 or lower would make them ineligible for continued probation and would result in academic suspension. In the class sessions following the survey, instructors provided an overview and reminders of the academic standing policy and SAP policy.

The survey responses highlighted a systemic barrier impacting student academic progress. Multiple students included feedback that instructors did not utilize the grading feature within the university learning management system (LMS) and had not provided formative feedback on submitted assignments. Though some students provided an estimated GPA without this information, they indicated they were unsure if their estimate was accurate. This information

was utilized to support Fall 2024 initiatives and messaging to encourage course instructors to utilize the LMS grading module as a strategy to support academic progress and retention.

Process Measures

Process measures for the improvement project included quantitative and qualitative data related to course implementation. Information regarding academic recovery course attendance rates and assignment completion rates was provided via aggregate data from the learning management system (LMS). Course instructors provided written notes and participated in group discussions regarding course curriculum delivery and teaching strategies.

Participants

Participants include all students enrolled in the academic recovery course for Spring 2024. Since data collection was embedded in the normal course activities (attendance and assignment submission), instructors had course-specific data in real time and could quickly discuss strategies related to student attendance and participation.

Process Measure Results & Findings

Based on the Spring 2024 academic calendar, the course curriculum included thirteen weeks of class meetings. This spanned a time period of sixteen weeks, including holidays, breaks, and reading/exam periods. The table below depicts aggregate rates of recorded absences and missing assignment submissions across all four sections of the recovery course.

Table 7

Absence and Missing Assignment Rates

	Total Enrollment	Absences	Missing Assignments
Week 1	50	27	0

Week 2	45	34	8
Week 3	45	30	2
Week 4	44	26	14
Week 5	43	32	12
Week 6	40	22	2
Week 7	40	18	0
Week 8	36	14	10
Week 9	35	14	8
Week 10	34	12	6
Week 11	34	19	0
Week 12	34	18	6
Week 13	34	12	0

Based on the theory of improvement, the recovery course was intentionally structured as an in-person course with both curricular topics and pedagogical practices to support sense of mattering. The course delivery included substantial engaged learning activities, peer-to-peer input, group discussion, and in-class assignments. Two of the foundational activities for the course learning outcomes involved outside facilitators in the first weeks of the class. Though students could receive the information in other formats, the inherent relational and peer feedback aspects of the group facilitation was lost. This in-person pedagogy was central to enacting the change ideas but relied upon a more rigid attendance structure to achieve goals.

Course instructors shared that students who attended class were engaged and completed in-class assignments, but that attendance was irregular for many students and some stopped attending with no response to multiple outreach attempts via email, phone, and text. Instructors provided anecdotal information that students reported missing class due to fatigue from not sleeping at night. This contributing factor was common across all class times, regardless of whether the class met at 9:00 am or 1:30 pm. In particular, course instructors noted a substantial drop in attendance following spring break (between week seven and week eight). Following the break, two instructors opted to meet in-person as a group once a week. The other two occasionally adjusted the class schedule to meet once a week. Thus, while there appears to be a

lower frequency of absences in the second half of the semester (weeks 8-13), there were fewer in-person class sessions offered.

These findings resulted in several key takeaways related to process and implementation. First, the importance of developing curricular activities that can be more easily adjusted if a student is absent for a particular class session, to ensure ongoing learning and relationship-building is not negatively impacted by a single absence. Additionally, this highlighted the need for the additional of topics related to sleep health and examining individual and systemic barriers impacting sleep quality for students. Class attendance arose as a major factor related to academic recovery and success.

Balance

Balance measures remind us to continue to look at the system surrounding the improvement initiative, exploring whether the intervention resulted in unintended impacts on outcomes or other areas. Balance measures for the improvement initiative included university enrollment data, information from open-ended questions within the anonymous surveys for students, semi-structured interviews with instructors, and review of recovery course grade impact on spring GPA.

Participants

University enrollment data includes all students placed on academic probation at the end of the fall semester (n = 78). Student survey data includes all students who responded to at least one of the mid-course or end-of course surveys (n = 29). Instructor interview data includes responses from the four instructors who taught the course in Spring 2024.

Balance Measure Results & Findings

The first major balance measure was trends for spring term enrollment and completion. University enrollment data provides critical insights regarding when students on academic probation left the university, highlighting if they had an opportunity to participate or engage in the academic recovery course. Students who did not enroll for spring semester had no opportunity to participate in the course. Similarly, students who left the university during the spring semester did not have the chance to engage in the full course implementation design. Enrollment data helps to highlight disparate opportunity to participate in and benefit from the improvement initiative as designed for the first cycle. Table 8 shows these differences.

Table 8

University Enrollment for First-Year Students Placed on Academic Probation

	Fall Enrolled	Spring Enrolled	Spring Completed
First-year students placed on probation	78	71	62
Race/Ethnicity			
Asian or Asian American	5	5	4
Black or African American	6	5	5
Hispanic or Latinx	6	5	3
Middle Eastern or North African	1	1	1
White or European	61	57	51
Gender			
Male	45	39	36
Female	33	32	26
Financial Need Status			
No Need	51	46	42
Low/Medium Low Need	9	8	7
Medium/Medium High Need	6	6	4
High/Very High Need	12	11	9

Of the seventy-eight students placed on academic probation at the end of the first semester, seventy-one (91%) returned for the spring term. It is important to note that university academic standing and financial aid policies allow all first-year students placed on academic

probation to enroll and retain their financial aid package for the spring semester. There were no significant differences in rates of spring enrollment based on race/ethnicity or financial need status. Those who did not return for spring were significantly more likely to be male.

Of the students who started but did not complete the spring semester (due to taking a mid-semester leave of absence or university withdrawal), students of color left at higher rates than white students (19% vs. 11%) and students with medium or higher financial need were more likely to leave than those with no or low financial need (24% and 11%). A mid-semester departure during a student's first year negatively impacts pace of completion considerations for financial aid, almost always resulting in loss of eligibility for financial aid. In most cases, students who depart mid-semester are facing serious health, family, or personal emergencies and no other academic options exist (e.g. reduced courseload, adjusted accommodations, extension of grade deadlines via incomplete policy, etc.).

The second balance measure was any unintended or negative outcomes based on responses from students enrolled in the course and from instructors teaching the four sections. Open-ended survey responses and interview notes were analyzed using in vivo coding to identify themes. In vivo coding uses the words and terms shared by the participants themselves. This method of coding serves an important purpose for exploring ontological questions related to participants' own interpretation of experiences (Saldaña, 2016). Only one theme arose as an unanticipated outcome related to the improvement initiative—and this theme was shared in both student and instructor comments. Two students and all four instructors noted that the short class time of 45 minutes negatively impacted the experience of the course. Students reported the class often “felt rushed” and the accelerated pace of activities or discussion within the class period “sometimes made me feel stressed.” Similarly, course instructors described feeling pressure to

incorporate meaningful individual check-ins and group activities and learning into the condensed class period. One instructor commented, “By the time everyone arrives and gets settled and we have one opening check-in activity, we are already more than halfway through the class time. It’s just not working well.”

Though this shortened class period was developed to account for offering a 1-credit course two times a week, the data from students and instructors supported the need to reevaluate the class length. Due to course scheduling policies and procedures, the class time could not be adjusted mid-semester. Following review with design team members, the class period was adjusted from 45 minutes to one hour for the second cycle.

The third balance measure sought to identify if the graded, credit-bearing course had any unintended negative impacts on academic progress for enrolled students. Spring recovery course grades and term grades were reviewed to determine if any course grades were lower than the term grade. Of the thirty-four students who earned a grade in the course, six students had a course grade lower than their overall spring term GPA. Table 7 reflects the course and term grades for these students. It is important to note that three students ceased attending the course and did not withdraw from the course, these students were assigned course grades of F.

Table 7

Recovery Course and Spring Term GPA

	Course GPA	Term GPA
Student A	2.7	2.88
Student B	2.3	2.64
Student C	1.7	3.17
Student D	0.0	0.98
Student E	0.0	1.1
Student F	0.0	2.19

Though it is possible the course content and outcomes resulted in higher term GPA than a student otherwise might have achieved, the lower course GPA nonetheless negatively impacts the overarching goals of the improvement initiative. This quantitative data highlights the need for additional intervention related to course options. For the second cycle, course structure included individualized conversations between the student and course instructor prior to the course withdrawal deadline. From a systems approach, this could also be addressed through the addition of administrative processes to withdraw a student who is not attending and not responding to outreach or guidance for course withdrawal.

Outcome Measures

Outcome measures for the improvement project inform whether the goals of improved academic recovery and retention were met. Academic data included review of individual improvement rates for students enrolled in the course, as well as comparison of aggregate data for academic recovery trends compared to the prior year. Finally, the data retention rates for first-year students placed on academic probation was compared with the pre-intervention rate.

Outcome Measure Results & Findings

The first question is whether students on academic probation who completed the course showed stronger rates of academic recovery and retention than students who did not complete the course. Table Eight below shows aggregate rates of GPA change from fall term to spring term for 1) all first year students placed on academic probation, 2) students enrolled in academic recovery course and completed, 3) students enrolled in academic recovery course and did not complete.

Table 8

GPA Change Fall-Spring 2024

Variable	n	Fall GPA		Spring GPA	
		Median	Mean	Median	Mean
First-year students placed on Academic Probation	78	1.357	1.215	2.400	2.330
Students who completed course	31	1.325	1.180	2.480	2.365
Students who did not complete course	15	1.138	1.075	2.100	1.933

While there was an overall improvement in GPA from fall to spring semester, students who completed the course had slightly stronger rates of improvement compared to those who were enrolled but did not complete the course. Students who completed the course showed a median spring GPA of 2.480, representing an increase of 1.155 in their grade point average. Students who stopped attending, dropped, or withdrew from the course had an increase of 0.962 in spring grade point average. Though the differences in GPA improvement are not statistically significant, there is one critical factor to consider as it relates to retention: the academic standing policy.

Based on the academic standing policy, students with a spring term GPA of 2.0 or higher were placed on continued probation while those with a GPA lower than 2.0 were placed on academic suspension. Table 9 shows a comparison of academic standing outcomes for students who completed the course compared to those who did not complete the course. Students who completed the course were significantly more likely to clear their probation and move to good standing (58.1% vs. 40%) and were overwhelmingly less likely to face academic suspension at the end of their spring term (22.6% vs. 46.7%).

Table 9

Academic Standing based on Course Completion

	Cleared Probation	Continued Probation	Academic Suspension

Completed Course (n = 31)	18	6	7
No/Low Financial Need	16	4	6
Medium/High Financial Need	2	2	1
White	15	4	4
Black/African American	2	0	0
Hispanic/Latinx	0	1	2
Asian, Middle Eastern, Multi-Racial (combined)	1	1	0
Dropped/Withdrew (n = 15)	6	2	7
No/Low Financial Need	5	2	4
Medium/High Financial Need	1	0	3
White	5	2	5
Black/African American	0	0	1
Hispanic/Latinx	0	0	0
Asian, Middle Eastern, Multi-Racial (combined)	1	0	1

While course completion was correlated with higher rates of academic recovery, there was an even stronger positive association for students with medium or high financial need. The overall academic recovery rate for students who completed the course was 77.4%. This represents students who either achieved continued probation with a spring GPA over 2.0 or cleared their probation by achieving a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher by the end of the spring term. Of the five students with medium/high financial need who completed the course, four demonstrated academic recovery (80%). Of the four students with medium/high financial need who completed the spring semester but dropped or withdrew from the course, only one demonstrated academic recovery (25%) while the other three were academically suspended. Since these are small numbers of students, it will be important to examine data and trends in future research in order to determine if any significant differences exist.

Academic standing trends based on students' racial/ethnic identities tell a much more complicated story. White students who completed the course were more likely to achieve academic recovery than white students who did not complete the course (82.6% vs. 58.3%). There was a small number of students of color who completed the course (seven) and who

completed the semester but not the course (three). Course completion was associated with higher rates of academic recovery for black students (100% vs. 0%), but completion did not result in improved outcomes for students with other underrepresented racial/ethnic identities. While the small number of students makes it difficult to draw conclusions, it is important to note the differences in academic recovery outcomes based on the racial/ethnic identities of students.

The second major question is whether overall recovery and retention rates improved compared to past years. Table 10 provides an overview of key academic recovery data comparisons pre- and post-improvement project. While the improvement initiative resulted in substantial positive academic and retention outcomes for those who completed the course, overall rates of retention were essentially unchanged for fall 2024 (71.8%) compared to the prior year (70.6%). Table 10 provides an overview of university retention records for students placed on academic probation in fall 2022 compared to fall 2023.

Table 10

Combined Academic Recovery and Retention Indicators AY22 – AY23

	2022	2023
FY students placed on academic probation	102	78
Completed spring term	82 (76.5%)	63 (76.8%)
Academically suspended	34 (33.3%)	14 (17.9%)
Average GPA change fall – spring	.869	1.043
	Retention Number/Rate	
Financial Need		
No/Low Financial Need	58 (72.5%)	47 (78.3%)
Medium/High Financial Need	14 (63.6%)	9 (50%)
Race/Ethnicity		
White	64 (76.2%)	45 (75%)
Black/African American	3 (42.9%)	4 (66.7%)
Hispanic/Latinx	2 (50%)	2 (33.3%)
Asian, Middle Eastern, Multi-Racial (combined)	3 (42.9%)	5 (83.3%)
Course Completion		
Completed Course	n/a	27 (87.1%)

Dropped/Withdrew from Course	n/a	10 (66.7%)
Overall Retention Rate	72 (70.6%)	56 (71.8%)

Fall 2024 enrollment data showed that students with medium/high financial need and Hispanic/Latinx students had rates of retention lower than the overall average for first-year students placed on probation. Of the eighteen students with medium/high financial need, only nine returned for the subsequent fall term – a 50% retention rate. In comparison, students with low or no financial need had a retention rate of 78.3%. Hispanic/Latinx students were even less likely to return – with a retention rate of only 33.3% compared to a 75% retention rate for white students. In comparing these rates for Hispanic/Latinx students, it is important to note the small sample size and reiterate these students comprise only a small portion of overall students placed on academic probation.

Of the seventy-eight first-year students placed on probation in fall 2023, twenty-two students (28.2%) were not retained. A majority of the students who were not retained either did not return for spring semester or did not complete the spring semester (fourteen of the twenty-two students). Though course completion was positively correlated with stronger academic outcomes and stronger rates of retention, these fourteen students did not have the opportunity to participate in the improvement initiative. This data pointed to the need to consider alternative timelines for implementation. Based on the outcome data, a recovery course was developed and offered during the second half of the term. The goal for the adjusted implementation timeline was to reach first-year students after they were demonstrating signs of academic distress, but before they left the university.

Limitations of the Findings – PDSA Cycle One

While academic outcomes for students who completed the course show positive results, there were substantial limitations to the findings for PDSA cycle one. Limitations include low response rates for surveys three and four, lack of detail and context in responses to open-ended survey questions, the challenge of interpreting the data related to course completion and academic outcomes, and the complex nature of the improvement project itself.

One notable limitation of this study is the lack of rich details and qualitative data to better explain the relationship between course completion and participant outcomes. Due to low response rates in the third and fourth surveys, there was significant difficulty in drawing meaningful conclusions from the qualitative data. While the first and second surveys yielded stronger participation, the final two surveys had a sharp decline in responses, leaving an insufficient sample size to evaluate or draw conclusions related to practical measures. Additionally, the responses in these final surveys lacked depth and context, with many participants providing one-word or very brief answers. This brevity limited the potential for effective coding or thematic analysis, as the data did not offer sufficient context or detail to uncover nuanced patterns or insights. The limited participation not only restricted the ability to identify general themes but made it impossible to conduct a critical analysis of potential differences or inequities in student experiences or outcomes based on demographic factors. This challenge underscored the importance of developing strategies to sustain student engagement and attendance, especially for the class in which the final survey is implemented.

While the quantitative findings demonstrate that participants who completed the academic recovery course achieved more positive academic outcomes compared to those who opted out of the course, it is unclear whether this difference is due to the improvement initiative itself or other factors and experiences of students who did not complete the course. Since the

evaluation design does not include surveys or interviews with students who did not complete the course, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding the potential efficacy of the improvement initiative for these students.

Finally, the findings are limited by the sheer breadth and complexity of the improvement initiative and implementation plan. There has never before been any academic recovery course offered. Thus, all aspects of this project are new and untested in the local context: course curriculum, instructor identities and positionality, pre-course communication, enrollment method, instructor training, course delivery, teaching pedagogy, and so on. While the evaluation plan included key measures that sought to answer fundamental questions related to the aim of the improvement work, there are a multitude of factors not measured that may have impacted the findings.

Improvement Initiative Design and Implementation – Cycle Two

Following the completion of the first improvement initiative cycle in spring 2024, I shared a summary of outcome data and student feedback with campus stakeholders and university leaders. There was also attention to this work and outcomes as part of broader university efforts related to student retention and success. Based on preliminary results, university partners supported offering the academic recovery course in the fall semester with altered structure and scope of eligibility for participation.

Based on feedback from stakeholders, university resources, and evaluation of needs for the fall term, the fall initiative design and implementation plan were distinctly different from the spring. In collaboration with partners in the learning center, we developed a plan and timeline for two fall course offerings. The first implementation was a recovery course scheduled at the beginning of the term for returning students. The second course was offered during the latter part

of the fall term, aimed at providing an earlier intervention for first-year students exhibiting signs of academic distress and improving rates of persistence into the spring term.

The first half-semester course was offered to three groups of students: 1) students who had successfully appealed an academic suspension and were continuing in the fall, 2) students who had been academically suspended and were returning after a semester away from school, and 3) students who had earned a term GPA of 1.0 or lower in the prior term. Students in the first two groups were administratively enrolled in the course and sent notice via email in late-July. Students in the third group were sent a different email with a description of the course and encouragement to enroll. The course was scheduled for twice a week for the first half of the semester, with a total of thirteen class sessions. Students provided feedback in surveys at the beginning and mid-point of the course to guide course topics and activities. I served as the co-instructor for this section, along with the executive director of the learning center. Due to the substantial differences in course design, implementation, and participants, students in this first-half semester course were not included in the data collection and analysis. Yet interactions with this group provided valuable perspective and insight for the broader improvement project. While data from this group is not included in the results and findings for cycle two, the interactions with and input from these students offered important insights for course design and delivery and implications for future implementation.

The course offered during the second half of the fall term was developed to provide an early intervention for first-year students. Rather than waiting until after the end of the semester, the goal was to provide additional holistic support for students during their first term. Advisors of first-year students received course information and directions for referring students to register for the course. Students also received direct invitations to register for the course. Students were

identified based on self-reported information in a survey completed by first-year students in their fifth week of classes. Based on survey responses, students received an email with information on the course and encouragement to register. Over 100 first-year students received an email invitation to register for the course. Five first-year students responded with request to register for the course.

Based on low course enrollment, the course design shifted from administrative enrollment (based on student response) to open enrollment for any student to register. Following the posting of mid-term grades in week seven of the term, students who were identified as at risk of failing two or more courses received an email notice with invitation to register for the course. Over three hundred students received an email invitation. An additional fourteen students registered, with a total of nineteen students enrolled in two different sections of the recovery course. Figure 7 depicts the difference between the planned and actual timeline of implementation.

Figure 7

PDSA Cycle Two: Implementation Timeline

Planned Timeline

<i>Invitation emails and enrollment</i>	<i>Instructor introduction emails</i>	<i>First day of class and First Survey for Students</i>	<i>Mid-Class Survey for Students and Instructors</i>	<i>End-of-Class Survey for Students and Instructors</i>
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Actual Timeline

<i>Invitation emails - No enrollment</i>	<i>Enrollment review, change in scope, second-round emails- Some enrollment</i>	<i>First day of class and First Survey for Students- Ongoing enrollment</i>	<i>Mid-Class Survey for Students and Instructors</i>	<i>End-of-Class Survey for Students and Instructors</i>
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The second half-semester course spanned six and a half weeks, with two class sessions each week for a total of thirteen class sessions. Second half-semester courses begin the day following the posting of mid-term grades. The first day of class for both sections was the following day, less than 48 hours following the posting of midterm grades and email outreach to invite students to register for the course. Some students registered prior to the first day of class, while others added the course during the drop/add period following the first day of class.

Barriers to Implementation

The changes in course enrollment and delivery between the first and second cycle resulted in multiple challenges for implementation of the improvement plan. Relatively few first-year students opted to enroll in the course. The short period of time between the posting of mid-term grades and the first day of class reduced the opportunity for additional outreach or time for students to consider enrolling. Additionally, this implementation plan did not allow for instructors to send pre-course emails introducing themselves, explaining the course in greater detail, and highlighting the importance of attendance at the first class – all of which were included in the first cycle and for returning students in the first half-semester course. The open enrollment model meant students who enrolled during the drop/add period after the first day of class missed critical foundational introductions and mattering activities aimed at building

awareness, trust, and relationships to support sense of mattering. Finally, instructors reported an unexpected challenge of multiple enrolled students missing the first class, which fell immediately following fall break, either due to delayed travel back to campus or illness following their visits with family and friends.

Evaluating the Improvement Initiative – Cycle Two

The improvement project changed dramatically between the spring cycle and the fall cycle, with differences in both the structure and curriculum of the course as well as the course participants. The spring cohort was comprised only of first-year students placed on academic probation and administratively enrolled in the course. In contrast, the fall course participants self-enrolled and included students from all four class years. These changes necessitated quick adjustments to the analysis plan. Table 11 shows the revised analysis plan for the second cycle.

Table 11

Cycle Two Analysis Plan

Type of Measure	Purpose/Goal/Aim	Type of Data Collected	Frequency/ Timing	Analysis Strategy
Outcome	Improved academic outcomes pre-course to post-course	University Records- GPA and Academic Standing	January 2025	Descriptive Statistics
Outcome	Retention from fall to spring	University Records- Spring Retention Rates	January 2025	Descriptive Statistics
Driver	Reduction in barriers impacting academic success	Qualitative – Qualtrics Survey	Mid-course & Final Survey	In Vivo and Pattern Analysis
Driver	Increasing sense of mattering	Quantitative- Qualtrics	Mid-course & Final Survey	Dependent means t-test
Process	Students are attending class	Attendance Chart	Weekly	Trend Analysis
Process	Instructors are implementing mattering practices	Interview Questions & Instructor Notes	Mid-course & Post-course	In Vivo & Pattern Analysis

Balance	Unintended or negative outcomes for students	Researcher-developed question: Qualtrics	Mid-course & Final Survey	In Vivo & Pattern Analysis
Balance	Unintended or negative outcomes for instructors	Interview Questions	Mid-course & Post-course	In Vivo & Pattern Analysis
Balance	Course grade impact on Fall GPA	University Records	January 2025	Descriptive Analysis

The second cycle occurred over a period of seven weeks from the first class to the last class date. This span of time included the week of Thanksgiving break, during which time classes were not in session and many students were away from campus. Due to significant absences during the first week of class, the first-week survey was administered across both the first and second weeks to support student participation and input for curricular topics.

Results and Findings – Cycle Two

The results for the second cycle of the improvement initiative are presented in this section. Data collection included pre-, mid-, and end-of course surveys for students, instructor interviews, and university records. The findings provide insights into the effectiveness of the adjusted implementation plan for the second cycle of the improvement project and offer considerations for future iterations of an academic recovery course.

Participants

Nineteen students self-enrolled in the second cycle of the course. Unlike cycle one, course enrollment was open and students with any GPA or academic standing were eligible to enroll. This included five first-year students, ten sophomores, two juniors, and one senior. Students provided demographic information in the first and final course survey. Demographic data is included below in table 12, which combines survey data and university financial need data.

Table 12*Enrolled Students*

Variable	Response (<i>n</i> = 19)
Race/Ethnicity	
Black or African American	2
Hispanic or Latinx	3
White or European	16
Gender	
Man	9
Non-binary/Genderfluid	0
Woman	10
Financial Need Category	
No/Low Need	12
Medium/High Need	7
Cumulative GPA (pre-course)	
GPA 3.0-4.0	2
GPA 2.5-2.99	5
GPA 2.00-2.49	5
GPA below 2.00	2
No pre-course GPA	5
Estimated Family Income	
\$0 - \$49,999	2
\$50,000 - \$99,999	1
\$100,000 - \$149,999	2
\$200,000 – above	2
Prefer not to disclose	12

Compared with demographic trends for the spring recovery course, students in the fall course were more likely to have medium or high financial need (36.8% vs. 24%), to be female (52.6% vs. 40.7%), and to be white (78.9% vs. 72.7%). Students were also substantially more likely to be in good standing. Of the fourteen students with a pre-course GPA, twelve were in good standing. Seven of these students had a cumulative GPA above 2.5. Students' self-reported pre-course GPA ranged from 1.0 to 3.8. This included self-reported estimated GPA's from first-year students.

Driver Measures: Results and Findings

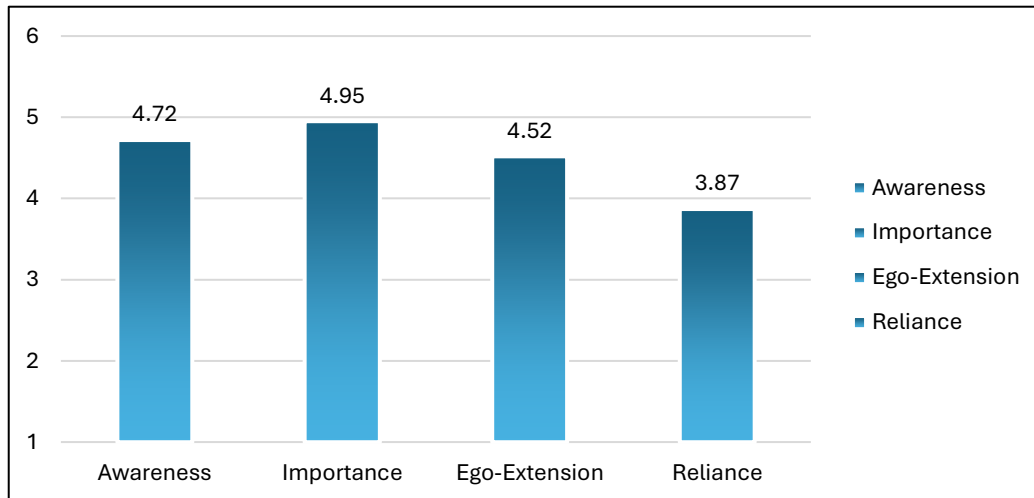
Data for driver measures was collected via three Qualtrics surveys provided to students enrolled in the course. The surveys included open-ended questions and the Unified Measure of University Mattering (UMUM) scale. The two driver measures for the second cycle of the improvement initiative were aimed at determining whether students were experiencing 1) an increased sense of mattering and 2) a reduction in barriers impacting academic success as they progressed through the course. The first and final class surveys were delivered in class and were emailed to students who were absent. The mid-course survey was emailed to all students. Of the nineteen enrolled students, fifteen completed the first survey, one completed the mid-course survey, and five students completed the final course survey. Three students completed the first and final survey and no students completed all three surveys.

Twelve students completed the Unified Measure of University Mattering (UMUM) scale in the first week survey. The average sense of mattering score was 4.52, which reflects a strong sense of mattering. Response for three of the four scales reflected a strong sense of mattering (>4.5). Students reported a very strong sense of importance (mean = 4.95). The element of reliance was the only area in which responses demonstrated a moderate sense of mattering (mean = 3.87). Compared with students in cycle one, overall sense of mattering was slightly higher (4.52 vs. 4.34).

One student completed the UMUM scale at the mid-course survey and four students completed the scale in the final survey. Of the four students who completed the scale in the final survey, only two completed the scale in the first week. Due to low response rates in the mid-course survey and the final course survey, there was insufficient data to analyze change in sense of mattering through the course.

Figure 8

Mattering Survey Responses – Cycle Two



The second driver measure was collected via student survey responses to open-ended questions regarding reduction in barriers impacting academic progress. Responses were analyzed using in vivo analysis for first-cycle coding and pattern analysis for second-cycle coding. In the first-week survey, students identified factors that had negatively impacted their progress. Themes that arose included: 1) mental health disorders or concerns (n = 10), 2) academic strategies or difficulties (n = 6), 3) serious personal incidents (n = 5), and 4) systemic barriers (n= 7).




While many of the self-reported factors in the second group were similar to the first cycle, responses related to systemic barriers arose as a unique theme. Two students reported negative experiences attempting to access mental health supports, two other students mentioned complicated and long processes related to accommodations, one student indicated they struggled to find the academic supports they needed, and two students cited specific negative interactions with faculty or staff. One student described their experiences as follows, “Lack of understanding from professors, fear of judgement and discrimination from professors.”

Five students completed the final class survey, providing responses to open-ended questions regarding factors the course did and did not help to improve. Responses were coded using in vivo and pattern coding. Three themes arose from the written comments, highlighting

two positive aspects and one area in which the course did not resolve underlying barriers students were experiencing. The first theme of enhanced academic strategies (n= 5) relates to the primary reason students opted to register for the course. The second theme that arose was that of the course being a psychologically safe space (n= 3). This highlights the integration of pedagogical strategies to support sense of mattering and culturally-responsive practices. The third theme is not surprising, with students acknowledging the limited scope of the course for resolving serious mental health concerns (n=3). Figure 9 provides examples of responses within each of the themes.

Figure 9

Themes related to barriers

 Enhanced Academic Strategies	<p>“This course helped me add structure into my life in many different ways, including helping structure my education but also my personal life.”</p> <p>“This course helped me with my motivation and procrastination. I had a designated time and place to figure things out.”</p>
 Safe Space	<p>“The class environment felt very safe and the teacher was very kind, which made me want to come to class.”</p> <p>“It was nice to have a judgement-free space that focused on classes.”</p>
 Mental Health Treatment	<p>“Did not really help with mental health, but there’s a lot of complicated factors definitely out of the scope of this class and somewhat out of the scope of counseling services.”</p> <p>“Course didn’t help me with my anxiety and depression, but I have a lot of other resources and they haven’t helped much yet either.”</p>

Process Measures: Results and Findings

Two process measures were collected to determine if the improvement project was delivered as designed: student attendance records and instructor interviews/notes regarding mattering strategies they implemented as part of the course. The attendance chart provides

insight into student participation in the improvement initiative, while the data from instructor interviews and notes helps to determine alignment with the three key pedagogical strategies for building sense of mattering.

Table 13

Enrollment and Attendance Rates

	Section A Enrollment	Section A Attendance	Section B Enrollment	Section B Attendance
Class 1	4	1	7	4
Class 2	8	4	11	7
Class 3	7	4	11	6
Class 4	7	4	11	6
Class 5	7	3	11	7
Class 6	6	4	11	6
Class 7	6	4	10	7
Class 8	6	3	8	4
Class 9	6	4	8	6
Class 10	5	4	7	5
Class 11	5	3	7	5
Class 12	5	4	7	2
Class 13	5	4	7	1

Students who attended the first or second class were substantially more likely to continue and successfully complete the course. The majority of students who did not attend the first or second class subsequently withdrew from the course or took a leave of absence for the semester (six out of eight students). As described in cycle one, class attendance, particularly at the beginning of the course, was strongly correlated with successful course completion. In interviews and notes, instructors described that students who missed a single course with no communication were very likely to cease future attendance and subsequently withdraw from the course. In contrast, students who communicated with professors regarding their absence typically returned to class and completed the course.

The second process measure involved instructor implementation of pedagogical practices to support sense of mattering. As described in the first cycle, the practices align with the four elements of mattering. Instructors were asked to describe how they enacted opportunities for: 1) students to share about themselves and their experiences (awareness, importance, ego-extension), 2) students to provide feedback or assistance to one another (awareness, importance, reliance), 3) the instructor to offer students frequent and individualized affirmations, strengths-based feedback, and culturally-responsive resources and support (awareness, importance, ego-extension). Responses were coded using in vivo and magnitude coding. These coding methods were selected in order to highlight the unique practices and perspectives of each instructor and to determine which practices were utilized more often. Magnitude coding helps to indicate the intensity or frequency of specific phenomena within qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016).

The most frequently utilized strategies included opportunities for students to share about themselves and their experiences. This included activities as a large group, in small groups or pairs of students, and one-on-one with the instructor. Instructors described how these opportunities occurred in every class session, as well as time between classes. Sometimes interactions were highly-structured and part of the formal curriculum, while other times they arose from informal or organic conversations in class.

One instructor explained, “On the first day we did the activity you [the researcher] provided to us [the instructors]. I did it last spring and both groups really enjoyed it. It was the three challenges and walk through thing. It was a great way for them to share their concerns or fears in an anonymous, low-stakes way. It helped establish that we all are going to experience things that will be difficult. It helped show you aren’t the only one and that you do have people around you who may know what

it's like and are willing to help you. It got them talking to each other and thinking about helping each other right off the bat.” Another instructor shared their own process: “We always started class with time to check-in. Before the Thanksgiving break, I asked students what they were most looking forward to. The first student shared they were excited to go home and see their dogs. This led to every student talking about their own pet and some even showing photos from their phones. It was a sweet, unplanned moment of connection.”

Instructors described offering individualized affirmation, input, and support less frequently, with these interactions often occurring during one-on-one meetings or in communications outside of class. Though interviews and notes reflected a lower frequency of examples, this may be due to the nature of the course and the curriculum, which was designed to provide culturally-relevant and inclusive information, resources, and guidance to students. Since this was already part of the formal curriculum, these strategies were woven into course discussions and assignments. Instructors described specific conversations and interactions that were unique to individual students. One professor described their approach: “I like to do one-on-one check-ins at the beginning and later in the semester. It's super-informal to start out. I tell them, ‘Hey, I really just want to get to know you, what's going on and what's been happening.’ I told them I would do everything I could to help them. Whether it was related to classes or just connecting them with resources outside of classes. I would let them know that, even if I didn't have the answer, I can help them find who does. Sometimes they had questions about talking with professors. A lot of what they shared was social stuff that was impacting how they showed up in class.” Another instructor provided a specific example of the nuanced topics and context that can arise in personal conversations: “One student had several absences so I offered to meet

with her one-on-one to help her get caught up. We started talking about her difficulty waking up in the morning and her sleep schedule. She shared that she was always wide awake until two or three o'clock in the morning. We ended up talking about her specific habits in the afternoon and evening. It was like a lightbulb went off. She made two big changes and started going to sleep closer to midnight. She was rarely absent after that and she told me it made a huge difference for her other classes.”

These individualized interactions also highlighted an example of improvement in academic motivation, potentially linked to increased sense of mattering: “A student emailed me in a panic during exam week. They had slept through an exam and woke up while it was in progress. They emailed me immediately to ask what they should do. I responded with guidance and they completed the exam later that day. They later thanked me and shared that they previously would have just freaked out and shut down and failed the class.”

Instructors shared the most difficult and least-frequently used strategy was that of students providing assistance, guidance, or input to one another. This was mentioned only as part of formal course activities and structures. One instructor noted practices such as “accountability time” one day each week for students to share what they were hoping to accomplish for the week and if they had completed their goal for the prior week. The instructor described that students liked the peer accountability aspect of this time. Course curriculum also included opportunities for peer input, such as one assignment in which each student identifies a small goal, presents it to the class, and then other students respond with an idea for a strategy, resources, or information that could help support the goal. Instructors shared some of the difficulties in facilitating this strategy. One instructor noted, “I started out wanting to do accountability groups for students to check-in with one another and provide support and feedback. I also hoped for students to do

group projects together. Due to absences and students withdrawing, I quickly dropped that idea and pivoted to accountability time.” Another instructor linked the difficulty with the course length, sharing: “The course felt like it was really five weeks, since we still had students adding and dropping in the first week and the last week was right after Thanksgiving break and before finals. It was a really short period of time to build the group trust and safety for really opening up and relying on each other.”

Balance Measures: Results and Findings

Balance measures for cycle two were collected to identify any unintended or negative consequences arising from the improvement project. Participants included students enrolled at the end of the course and the course instructors. Data was collected from open-ended questions within the anonymous student surveys, semi-structured interviews with instructors, and review of recovery course grade impact on fall GPA.

There were two prompts included in the final course survey to collect data for balance measures. Five students responded to the anonymous survey.

- 1) Please share any ideas/feedback to help improve this course in the future:
- 2) Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience in this class:

Student responses were generally positive, noting the helpful academic and personal support from the class. Four of the five students indicated “none” or “nothing I can think of” in response to ideas for improving the course. One student recommended increasing the course time, “I feel like this should be an hour and 20 minutes. I think this class was very helpful and definitely wouldn’t mind being in it for longer.” Multiple students reported the course curriculum was helpful and relevant, providing feedback such as, “You will become a better student at the end of

it.” Students seemed to benefit from the learning activities, with one person indicating, “Taught me information that I will actually use in daily life,” and another affirming the course was, “Very worth taking regardless of how you may be doing in classes.” These comments demonstrate distinct differences from feedback in cycle one, seemingly focusing more on the academic skills and strategies that were learning outcomes of the course and less on the emotional support, peer accountability, or other relational aspects related to course pedagogical practices. Though the overall feedback was positive in both cycle one and cycle two, the *focus* of the positive feedback was very different. The absence of comments in Cycle Two related to mattering, identity, or meaningful connects could point to a difference in pedagogical practices, may be a result of the different demographic and academic makeup of the class cohort, or could be related to the much shorter timeframe of the course.

The second major balance measure sought to identify if the graded, credit-bearing course had any unintended negative impacts on academic progress for enrolled students. Fall recovery course grades and term grades were reviewed to determine if any course grades were lower than the term grade. Of the twelve students who earned a grade in the course, ten students had a course grade higher than their fall term GPA, no students had a course grade equal to their fall term GPA, and two students had a course grade lower than their fall term GPA. Table 14 reflects the course and term grades for these two students.

Table 14

Recovery Course and Fall Term GPA

	Course GPA	Term GPA
Student A	0.0	0.33
Student B	2.0	2.68

As described in the findings and results on cycle one, instructors communicated with students at risk of failing the academic recovery course to provide guidance regarding options, including the option for a course withdrawal. The goal for this strategy was to ensure students did not experience negative academic outcomes as a result of a low or failing grade in the academic recovery course. This strategy was implemented in cycle two. Of the two students with a course grade lower than their term grade, both intentionally opted to stay in the course. The student who received a failing grade in the course was contacted and explained their reasons for continued enrollment. After hearing the academic implications for continuing in the course and receiving a grade of F, they declined the option for a course withdrawal.

Outcome Measures: Results and Findings

Outcome measures for the improvement project inform whether the goals of improved academic recovery and retention were met. Outcome measures include evaluation of fall term grades of students who enrolled in the course as well as trends for persistence into spring term. The first question is whether returning students (sophomore status and above) showed improved academic outcomes compared to their prior semester of enrollment. Prior-term GPA’s for returning students who enrolled in the course ranged from 1.3-3.6. The chart below shows aggregate rates of GPA change from the spring to fall semester.

Table 15

GPA Change Spring – Fall 2024

Variable	n	Spring GPA		Fall GPA	
		Median	Mean	Median	Mean
Returning students who completed course	9	2.53	2.28	2.57	2.59
Returning students who did not complete course	3	2.06	2.39	2.67	2.31

While fall GPA was, on average, slightly higher than spring GPA for returning students who completed the course, these students did not show significant grade improvements at the end of their fall term. Three returning students enrolled in the course and subsequently withdrew. For these students, academic outcomes were significantly higher than the spring term. These students may have determined they were able to access supports on their own, without the course, or that barriers that had impacted their spring term academic progress were reducing or resolving in the fall term. Due to the small sample size, it is difficult to draw conclusions for these students.

Of the five first-year students who enrolled in the course, two students completed the course. These students achieved good standing at the end of the fall term, with GPA's well above 2.0. Due to the current policy and process for reporting mid-term grades as *AR – At risk for non-success in the course* or *S-Performing satisfactorily in the course*, it is not possible to analyze grade change from pre-course performance at midterms to post-course performance at final grades. Of the three first-year students who did not complete the course, two students did not attend a single session and the other student attended only one class session before ceasing attendance. None of these students achieved good standing status at the end of the fall. This is an important finding, as the fall course was specifically offered to provide an effective early intervention for first-year students. In order to maintain anonymity, further data analysis could not be conducted on these first-year students.

The second outcome measure is the rate of retention from fall semester to spring semester for students who enrolled in the course. Also known as persistence, when students continue from one term to the next within the same academic year, this outcome provides an early indication of likelihood for continuation and graduation. Of the nineteen students who enrolled in the course,

fifteen students continued enrollment into the spring term. Of the four students who did not return for the spring term, three took a leave of absence during the fall term and one took a leave of absence after the end of the fall semester.

Limitations of the Findings – PDSA Cycle Two

The findings from the second cycle of the improvement project involve several limitations which should be considered when interpreting the results. Three major areas of concern include changes in process and population between cycle one and cycle two, the timing of the intervention, and low survey response rates. Each of these factors impacts the ability to draw clear conclusions about the effectiveness of the course and accomplishment of the aim of the improvement work. These limitations highlight the complexities of the adjusted implementation plan and emphasize the need for additional cycles with improved data collection strategies.

The first limitation involves significant changes in the process and population from cycle one to cycle two. During the first cycle, students were administratively enrolled in the course, while in the second cycle, participation was voluntary. Additionally, the first cycle targeted only first-year students on academic probation, whereas the second cycle ultimately was open to students across all academic standings and class years, from first-year to senior students. Further, the timing of the intervention shifted, with the first cycle beginning at the start of the semester and the second starting at mid-semester. These variations create substantial inconsistencies in the course implementation and the student population, making it challenging to compare the outcomes across cycles.

The timing of the second-cycle intervention presents another significant limitation. The course ran for only six weeks and in the second half of the semester. Since the second cycle

occurred in the latter half of the semester, there may not have been enough time for the intervention to influence students' academic performance within the fall term. One instructor specifically noted the struggle of starting in the second half of the semester, noting that students had already established habits and schedules for the semester, which was much harder to adjust as compared to working with students in cycle one. This instructor shared they found themselves often telling students to, "keep this in mind for next semester," as they taught certain topics and strategies. Due to the timing of the implementation, the potential impact of the course might emerge in students' grades or behaviors in the following spring semester, but these delayed effects fall outside the results and findings for this cycle.

A third limitation is the low response rates to survey. Of the nineteen students who enrolled in the course, not a single student completed all three surveys and only two students fully completed the quantitative and qualitative measures within the first and final survey. Additionally, no students responded to the invitation for a post-course interview to gain further perspective on their experience of the course. Though responses to open-ended questions in the final survey provided some insight into barriers the course did and did not help to address, the lack of more complete and robust data makes it difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of the specific impacts, strengths, and drawbacks for the second cycle of the improvement project.

Leadership Lessons Learned

The process of developing and implementing a credit-bearing academic recovery course provided valuable opportunities for growth, development, and learning related to leading a cross-divisional initiative. This section explores key leadership lessons learned through the process, highlighting the value of relationships, benefits of co-teaching, the impact of non-anonymous surveys on student reflection, the role of external accountability in fostering persistence, and the

necessity of flexibility in course design. These lessons emerged through direct experience, student feedback, and iterative course improvements, offering important considerations for educators and administrators working to support students facing academic challenges.

One leadership lesson emerged from the benefit of working at the university for over seventeen years and cultivating deep relationships across faculty and staff. These long-standing connections provided an opportunity for me to leverage professional and social networks to recruit course instructors who hold significant leadership positions with extensive knowledge and influence across the institution. This was a unique advantage for students, as they were able to engage with instructors who possessed not only expertise but also access to key university systems and decision-makers. By learning from and building relationships with these well-connected leaders, students gained insights and opportunities that extended beyond the classroom, reinforcing the importance of mentorship and institutional networks in their academic journey.

One of the most valuable leadership lessons from implementing the academic recovery course was the benefit of co-teaching. In my experience co-teaching with the executive director of the learning center, we each brought distinct expertise—one grounded in student affairs with expertise in student wellbeing and the other situated in academic affairs with a deep understanding of learning strategies and academic coaching. Co-teaching allowed for a dynamic and complementary instructional approach that supported students more holistically. This combination provided students with a richer learning environment, as they benefited from varied perspectives and approaches to academic recovery. Additionally, co-teaching fostered professional development for both instructors; observing one another's pedagogical strategies,

facilitation techniques, and student interactions enhanced our individual and collective abilities to engage students more effectively.

The experience of co-teaching also reinforced the broader value of cross-divisional collaboration in student success initiatives. The partnership between academic affairs and student affairs professionals created a uniquely supportive environment where students were encouraged to develop both practical academic skills and a stronger sense of personal efficacy. By blending perspectives and expertise from both domains, we were able to address the complexities of academic recovery in a more nuanced and impactful manner. This model highlights the potential for greater collaboration between traditionally separate institutional areas to foster student success in innovative ways.

Another important insight was the significant difference in response rates and the depth of student reflections when surveys were not anonymous. As a part of the course I co-taught, we provided students with the option to include their names in surveys that included questions on experiences, barriers, input for course topics, and general feedback on the course. When we explicitly stated that names were optional, but that any responses would be used for personalized support—engagement increased dramatically. Nearly all students responded, and the quality of their reflections were much deeper and more detailed than those in the anonymous surveys. More importantly, students expressed feeling that their input mattered. They saw their responses being used to shape class discussions, inform individualized guidance, and address collective concerns in real time. This approach not only strengthened their engagement with the course but also reinforced their sense of mattering and that we, their instructors, were investment in their personal and academic success.

The importance of external accountability emerged as a key theme in class conversations with students. Later in the course, many students shared that they initially remained enrolled because of external expectations or mandates—such as from parents or coaches—rather than intrinsic motivation. However, by the end of the course, their reflections indicated a shift: they recognized the course’s value and voiced they wished it had been a required component of their academic recovery. This transition underscores the critical role that structured accountability can play in student retention and success. This also provides further explanation for the extremely low rates of participation in the fall course offering, as well as the trends described in the historical review of the problem in the local context. Students most in need of support are often the least likely to reach out or voluntarily connect with resources, and may not initially recognize their need for support (Ciarrochi, et al., 2002; Clegg, et al., 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). An academic standing policy requirement or accountability process could provide the necessary structure for students to engage in the early weeks of the course. Over time, as relationships deepen and students experience stronger sense of mattering, internal motivation increases, leading to more sustained and self-directed academic improvement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Blackmon, 2018; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989).

Flexibility and responsiveness emerged as crucial elements in designing and delivering an academic recovery course. What began as an academic recovery course with administrative enrollment for first-year students placed on academic probation quickly shifted to an academic success course open to both first-year and returning students who self-registered. This resulted in a quick pivot in messaging and outreach to students and advisors. Due to the nature of credit-bearing courses and with paid instructors, this change was necessary to meet minimum course enrollment in order to offer the course. Though this shift was not ideal from the standpoint of

traditional research, it offered a valuable leadership opportunity demonstrate quick adjustments in order to best serve student needs.

Ultimately, the implementation of the academic recovery course provided critical leadership lessons in relational leadership, pedagogical strategy, student engagement, and institutional collaboration. The insights gained from co-teaching, rethinking survey methodologies, reinforcing structured accountability, and maintaining curricular flexibility all contributed to a more effective and impactful student experience. These lessons serve as valuable considerations for future improvement projects focused on supporting students' academic recovery and success.

Implications and Recommendations

This section highlights the key findings from two cycles of implementation of the academic recovery course and examines the practical implications of these findings, offering recommendations for how universities can integrate relationship-building and mattering into academic recovery programs. Additionally, this section outlines policy considerations to create long-term structure for these efforts and sustain their impact over time. Finally, the section identifies areas for future research to continue to enhance effective strategies for supporting student retention and success in academic recovery processes.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

First year students who completed the academic recovery course in spring 2024 had more positive academic outcomes and were more likely to be retained compared to students who did not complete the course. Course completion was positively associated with stronger improvements in GPA from fall to spring and greater likelihood to move to good standing at the

end of the spring term (58.06% vs. 40.0%). Students who completed the course were significantly less likely to face academic suspension at the end of the spring term compared to those who did not complete the course (22.58% vs. 46.67%). Finally, the retention rate for students who completed the course was significantly higher than for those who did not complete the course (87.1% vs. 66.67%).

Though there was insufficient data in the final course survey to determine changes in sense of mattering from pre-course to post-course, responses to open-ended questions in the mid-course and final surveys offered key insights into the importance of a cohort model. Student responses highlighted the value of peer accountability for achieving academic goals as well as interactions that supported reductions in feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and isolation.

The fall course offering for both new and returning students yielded mixed results. While this model offered an earlier intervention for students experiencing barriers to academic success at the mid-point of the semester, the model of outreach and self-enrollment resulted in extremely low registration rates for first-year students ($n = 5$) and even lower completion rates ($n = 2$). Though students who completed the course reported they found value in the experience and felt that it was helpful for both academic strategies and general life skills, academic outcomes for returning students did not show significant improvements compared to the prior term. Additionally, student responses to open-ended questions for the second cycle highlight an important difference from the first cycle. While students in the second cycle voiced positive experiences of the course, there was a lack of any statements related to a *shared experience* or feeling *less isolated or alone* in one's experience. This is an important distinction between the two data sets and points to the substantial differences in the composition of the cohort groups between cycle one and cycle two.

Analysis of the findings outcomes from the first two cycles of this improvement initiative supports continued implementation of an academic recovery course as an intervention for first-year students placed on academic probation. The results underscore the importance of a structured course with curriculum and pedagogy that fostering a sense of mattering. The results affirm several key aspects of the improvement initiative that are necessary for the success of the improvement project within the local context, as well as factors that should be adjusted and assessed further. The findings point to important recommendations related to *how*, *when*, and *for whom* the course is provided.

First, an administrative registration model remains a critical component of the academic recovery course's effectiveness. Automatically enrolling students in the course removes barriers to participation, ensuring that those who may be hesitant to seek support still receive structured academic assistance. The enrollment differences between the two cycles and historical data regarding past opt-in offerings demonstrates that self-enrollment is not an effective strategy. This approach also signals institutional commitment to student success by actively creating a structure for support. Additionally, administrative registration helps streamline enrollment processes, preventing delays or confusion that could create additional barriers for students.

The course structure and pedagogy should continue to be intentionally designed to support students' sense of mattering and center relationships as foundational elements of academic recovery. A multitude of scholars have highlighted the value of *how* a course is designed and implemented: affirming the importance of specific teaching pedagogies and practices to enhance student mattering, belonging, and motivation (Felton & Lambert; 2020; Flett, et al. 2022; Glessmer, 2022; Mohammed, et al.; 2023; Pergason, et al., 2016; Robinson, 2019; Simpson, 2016; Virtue, et al., 2023). The course structure should integrate activities that

help students reflect on their strengths, provide feedback and support for one another, and develop strategies for strengthening relationships with faculty and advisors. Instructor training should focus on pedagogy practices aligned with the four elements of mattering, equipping faculty with strategies to create an inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Instructors must utilize practices such as personalized feedback, early one-on-one check-ins, and classroom activities that emphasize student voices, experiences, and engagement. Finally, a co-teaching model with instructors who hold different areas of expertise and positions in different departments provides students with even greater opportunities to make meaningful connections across the university. Institutions should continue to prioritize this model and explore opportunities for expanding its reach, such as incorporating peer mentors who have successfully completed the course.

The results and findings from the second cycle provide important implications for *when* the intervention should occur. Though the goal of the second cycle was to provide an earlier intervention for first-year students with signs of academic distress, this goal was not met. In spite of substantial outreach through advisors and directly to first-year students, only five students enrolled in the course and only two attended more than one class session. Researchers have highlighted that students are more likely to respond and engage with interventions when they are at a point of academic crisis with real consequences (Clegg, et al., 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). First-year students with low midterm grades may not perceive they are in academic crisis and have not yet experienced any real consequences (e.g. grades, academic probation, etc.). Though some universities have seen success with current-term academic success interventions for first-year students with low midterm grades (Creighton University, 2024), the research points to

potential greater efficacy following the posting of grades and notice of academic standing. Thus, a fall semester course aimed at first-year students is not recommended moving forward.

Winter term, covering a span of three weeks and sixteen class days, provides a unique opportunity for implementation of a required academic recovery course. Based on first-cycle findings related to students who leave the university before the start of the spring semester, implementation of an academic recovery course during winter term could potentially improve rates of persistence into the spring semester. This timing would allow for students to develop individualized academic recovery plans and adjust course registration before starting the spring semester—more effectively leveraging options such as the university course repeat policy. A winter term intervention would also provide more time for students to connect with critical support resources before the start of spring term. In cycle one and cycle two, the most frequently-reported factor impacting academic progress was mental health. This would mean that students start the spring term with a plan and supports already in place, offering an even greater opportunity for academic recovery by the end of the spring term and retention into the fall. This plan may also reduce the number of mid-semester departures by providing students who are experiencing serious health struggles with more detailed guidance on the option of a leave of absence. This strategy could further address inequities in retention rates, since students who take a leave of absence during the spring term typically lose financial aid eligibility while those who take a leave prior to the start of the spring semester retain their financial aid package for the fall term.

Finally, maintaining a cohort model specifically for students placed on academic probation strengthens peer connections and enhances the overall impact of the course. Though other courses and resources should continue to be offered for any student seeking academic

structure and support, this particular course should be limited to students identified through the academic standing process. Trends in student responses, especially the differences in the nature of responses between cycle one and cycle two, aligns with existing research that supports a cohort model for fostering a sense of shared understanding and reducing feelings of isolation that and shame associated with being placed on academic probation (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012; Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Robinson, 2019; Rojas, 2021). The absence of cycle two responses related to these topics aligns with the lack of shared experience for students enrolled in the fall course. Furthermore, a first-year cohort enables instructors to tailor discussions and interventions to the unique challenges faced by students in their transition to college, ensuring that the course remains relevant and responsive to their needs.

While aspects of this model may be applicable for other universities and in other local contexts, it is important to note the findings, implications, and recommendations are specific to a university with a residential campus model that offers only in-person course delivery. Additionally, it is important to consider the description of the local context and the demographics of students within the context. All first-year students in cycle one of the improvement project were full-time students living on-campus in residence halls. Additionally, 100% of students in both cycles were of traditional college-age (18-22 years old).

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

While students who attended and completed the course saw improved academic outcomes and reported positive course experiences, those who dropped or withdrew from the course early in the semester or ceased attending were more likely to face academic suspension and were less likely to return the following term. The outcomes of this study support the additional use of a course completion requirement within the academic standing policy.

Additionally, student feedback and research supports the benefits of required interventions, which can help to mitigate multiple barriers to voluntary participation.

Feedback from students who continued with the course highlighted the importance of external accountability structures in the early weeks of the course. Some students shared they had a family member, coach, or other key individual who provided this accountability and communicated expectations or requirements for continued class enrollment. This relational accountability assumes that students are sharing their academic standing status with family, friends, or other important figures in their life. Research highlights that students may hide their status due to shame or embarrassment (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012; Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Robinson, 2019; Rojas, 2021). In addition to the practice of administrative enrollment, a policy requirement for course completion would help support class attendance.

Research also points to the idea that students may not participate in voluntary academic support options due to a strong sense of self-reliance and personal ownership of problems (Clegg, et al. 2006). Especially when academic struggles are the result of non-academic barriers (e.g. health concerns, roommate conflict, grief, trauma, etc.), students may be more likely to believe they, themselves, bear sole responsibility for addressing these problems. Clegg (2006) and her colleagues found that students repeatedly and consistently shared the belief that these problems *would not, could not, or should not* be addressed via academic support interventions. This provides a potential explanation for students who dropped the course prior to attending the first section, assuming an academic recovery course would not address their individual experiences. It is important to note that student survey responses in both cycles underscored mental health challenges as the most commonly-reported factor impacting academic progress—followed closely by serious personal incidents and systemic barriers. Though students were not

asked if they shared these concerns or sought out assistance, the research suggests these students were unlikely to do so. A course completion requirement would help to get students in the door—so they have an opportunity to see, understand, and experience holistic academic guidance and support.

The implementation of a course completion requirement should be carefully developed to ensure it does not perpetuate inequities or systemic barriers to academic success. For example, the policy must include exceptions and alternative support options for extenuating circumstances such as a student who must work or provide care to a dependent during the times a course is offered. Thus, the policy must allow for appropriate flexibility for alternative options if course enrollment would create a disparate negative impact for a student. Policy language and any related communications should clearly state the course completion requirement is intended to support academic recovery and success.

Institutional and departmental budgets should reflect dedicated funding for continued course implementation. This includes ongoing funds to pay instructors for teaching a one-credit course, a small budget for course materials and activities, and stipends for new instructor training. Additionally, institutional policy and funding structures should ensure this course does not result in additional tuition costs for enrolled students. If the course results in an overload of registered credits, the university should provide a waiver or other avenue for offsetting the typical overload tuition rate. All of these policies and procedures could be aligned with the current model that exists for the first-year experience course.

Future iterations of an academic recovery course will benefit from continued collaborative and cross-department curriculum review and refinement, ongoing instructor training and co-teaching opportunities, and alignment of policy and processes to support

administrative enrollment and enhanced external accountability structures. A thoughtfully designed curriculum and well-prepared instructors can reinforce a sense of belonging that strengthens students' academic motivation, while a first-year cohort structure fosters connection and shared experience. Finally, an administrative registration model and a course completion requirement within the academic standing policy provides greater access and external accountability to support students' attendance and persistence in the course.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite growing recognition of the importance of academic success and recovery initiatives, research examining the factors that contribute to their effectiveness remains limited. Further investigation is needed to understand how specific components of academic recovery courses influence student experience, motivation, and long-term success. In particular, future research should explore the impact of instructor identity and positionality, attendance policies and motivations, and training models that equip instructors to foster a sense of mattering.

One critical area for future research is the influence of instructor identity and positionality on student experience and academic outcomes in academic recovery courses. Instructors bring diverse backgrounds, experiences, and institutional roles, all of which may shape how they engage with students and deliver course content. Understanding how factors such as faculty status and positionality (e.g., tenure-track vs. adjunct, new coordinator vs. senior-level admin), personal academic journeys, and social identities impact student perceptions and engagement could inform instructor selection and training processes. Future studies should examine whether students respond differently to academic recovery course instructors with varying identities and how these dynamics affect student motivation, trust, and academic performance.

Another important area for research involves exploring policies and strategies that support student attendance in academic recovery courses. While attendance is a known predictor of academic success, little is understood about the specific motivations and barriers that influence attendance in academic success courses. Future research should investigate whether distinct differences exist between students' reasons for attending—or avoiding—academic courses versus academic recovery courses. Additionally, studies could explore the effectiveness of different attendance policies in academic recovery courses, including incentive-based approaches, mandatory participation, or flexible attendance structures, in improving student engagement and course outcomes. These insights could inform policies that balance external accountability with a personal-agency approach.

Finally, future research should examine the effectiveness of different training models for equipping academic recovery course instructors to foster a sense of mattering among students. Instructor pedagogy and teaching style plays a crucial role in shaping course dynamics and student experience (Burke Leon, et al., 2019; Felton & Lambert, 2020; Gentile & Budzilowicz, 2022). This improvement project incorporated three pre-course, in-person training sessions of approximately five hours total. Instructors also gathered for multiple in-person meetings during cycle one. This structure is somewhat time-intensive and may create barriers for individuals to serve as instructors. Additionally, this in-person model of training may not be feasible in other university contexts. Studies could evaluate various training approaches and impact on student outcomes, including academic persistence and sense of mattering. Understanding which training methods are most effective could enhance the design and delivery of academic recovery interventions.

Future research specific to academic recovery courses will provide valuable guidance for improving program design and implementation. By investigating the role of instructor identities, exploring attendance motivations and policies, and evaluating training models for fostering student sense of mattering, researchers and practitioners will gain a more comprehensive understanding of how to best support students on academic probation. These efforts will ultimately strengthen institutional strategies for academic recovery, retention, and long-term success.

Conclusion

The goal for this improvement project was to effectively support academic recovery and retention of first-year students placed on academic probation. My research into academic recovery initiatives uncovered a broad array of systemic factors that influenced students' likelihood of achieving academic recovery and moving to good academic standing. Policies, processes, official communications, and even academic recovery strategies included explicit and implicit messages that students did not belong at or matter to the institution. Over and over again, researchers described the shame and embarrassment students experienced upon receiving notice of academic probation status (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2012; Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Robinson, 2019; Rojas, 2021). These negative feelings resulted in students isolating themselves and, instead of feeling motivated to improve and reach out for support, they were more likely to disengage from school and hide their status from family and friends.

Improvement science challenges us to deeply understand the culture and context in which a problem exists, and to look for the underlying factors contributing to the current outcomes. Through the process of conducting research within the local context, stakeholders helped to uncover and identify aspects of our policy, processes, resources, and communications that

contributed to a lack of effective support for students placed on academic probation. The resulting improvement project was a credit-bearing academic recovery course with activities, structure, and delivery methods intended to strengthen student sense of mattering. Course instructors were recruited and selected based on demonstrated commitment to student success and inclusive excellence. Finally, instructors received training on course delivery methods, advising strategies, and curricular activities to support student sense of mattering.

The course was implemented in two cycles. The first cycle included first-year students on academic probation who were administratively enrolled and completed the course in the spring semester over a period of fifteen weeks. The second cycle was open to students from all class years and any academic standing, offering the opportunity for any student to opt-in to this half-semester course taught over a period of seven weeks. While students in both cycles self-reported that they experienced a reduction in barriers to academic progress and that they learned valuable information/strategies from the course, only students in the first cycle showed improved academic outcomes at the end of the term they completed the course. Compared with students who did not complete the course in the first cycle, first-year students who completed the semester-long course had stronger improvements in GPA, were more likely to move to good standing status, and were more likely to return the following fall semester. Overall rates of retention for first-year students placed on academic probation remained similar to prior years, signaling a need for additional strategies and ongoing work to support student persistence. The information gathered and the lessons learned from these first two cycles will be utilized to continue to refine the improvement initiative.

While the short-term goal for this project was to improve academic outcomes and retention for first-year students placed on probation, the ultimate vision for this work is to

transform university culture and systems. For students like Devyn, and all who Devyn represents, we must continue to advance initiatives and build a campus where every student feels seen, cared for, and truly valued. It is through these relationships—relationships in which students know they matter—that we create space for students to share their stories and their experiences. It is through these meaningful connections that we create pathways not just to graduation, but to the lifelong opportunities and privileges that come with a college degree. We must listen. We must learn. And we must act—so that every student has the opportunity to walk across the commencement stage and step boldly into their future.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Course Proposal

ELN 2720: Elon Rebound- Holistic Advising for Academic Success

Rebound (verb) - ri-'baund

: to spring back on or as if on collision or impact with another body

: to recover from setback or frustration

Description: ELN 2720 provides holistic academic support and guidance for students who have experienced barriers impacting their academic progress and success. Through an intentional cohort experience, students will identify personal goals, develop an action plan, and implement academic success strategies. Course curriculum focuses on enhancing academic skills, building meaningful relationships for academic success, strengthening holistic wellbeing, and addressing barriers to academic progress.

Pedagogy: This course is led by instructors trained in culturally-responsive advising and committed to the [NACADA Core Values](#) of academic advising. Teaching and curricular activities are intended to strengthen student sense of [mattering](#), which is linked with higher academic motivation, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and help-seeking behaviors. These approaches are associated with increased retention and success for all students, as well as stronger academic outcomes for student with marginalized identities.

Credit: 1 credit, graded (two hours per week—one class session and one activity session)

Enrollment: Capped at 15 students per section, minimum class size of 8

Sections: Five sections offered (serving 40-75 students)

Pilot Overview: First-year students who earn a fall semester GPA of 1.5* or below (*recommend range of 1.4-1.6 based on enrollment cap and capacity) will be automatically enrolled in spring semester course. Anticipated eligibility of 40-60 first-year students, based on review of data for 2018-2022.

Information regarding ELN 2720 course and enrollment will be included in probation letter to student at end of fall semester. Course days/times will be finalized prior to winter break. By end of first week in winter term, course rosters will be confirmed and enrollment will be finalized. Registration will be posted to student OnTrack account by end of second week of winter term. Students will remain enrolled regardless of winter term academic performance.

The course will meet twice a week through the spring term. Based on current academic standing policy, students are not required to complete the course and may choose to drop/withdraw.

This course will support mentoring, wellbeing, and retention efforts. Additionally, implementation in the first year, rather than following continued probation or academic suspension, will increase retention of students with high financial need. Successful completion of the course will help students meet [Satisfactory Academic Progress](#) requirements and maintain eligibility for financial aid.

Students who failed Elon 1010 in the fall may take Elon 1010 concurrently with this course. ELN 2720 course instructors do not serve as the academic advisor (related to course selection, approval, registration) but may coordinate with academic advisors to support academic progress.

Curriculum will be provided to instructors, with guidance for adaptations to respond to individual student and group dynamics. Course outcomes assessed via three anonymous in-class surveys including measures for mattering and meaningful relationships (first week, mid-term, last class). Academic outcome assessment will include analysis of change in GPA from fall 2023 to spring 2024, as well as analysis of retention data (fall 2024). Finally, researcher will invite students to participate in interviews during fall 2024, following completion of course. IRB proposal with expedited review to be submitted in late-November 2023.

Instructors will receive stipend for teaching a 1-credit course. Instructors will meet twice a month for working lunch to discuss holistic advising strategies, questions, and timely information. Instructors may request funds to support engaged learning initiatives, mentoring, and relationship-building activities.

Appendix B: Course Syllabus

ELN 2720: Elon Rebound- Holistic Advising for Academic Success

Instructor: [Name, Title]

Office Hours: Upon Request – please use my booking link

Office Location: [Instructor Office]

Phone: [Office Phone] ~ Email: [University Email]

Rebound (verb) - ri-'baund

: to spring back on or as if on collision or impact with another body

: to recover from setback or frustration

Course Description: ELN 2720 provides holistic academic support and guidance for students who have experienced barriers impacting their academic progress and success. Through an intentional cohort experience, students will identify personal goals, develop an action plan, and implement academic success strategies. Course curriculum focuses on enhancing academic skills, building meaningful relationships for academic success, strengthening holistic wellbeing, and addressing barriers to academic progress.

Course Learning Outcomes: Students who successfully complete ELN 2720 will be able to...

- Identify current strengths and areas for focus related to *academic learning skills* (information processing, test strategies, procedures for study and assignment completion); *academic mindset* (motivation, attitude, and anxiety); and *academic self-regulation* (concentration, time management, self-testing, utilizing learning supports and resources)
- Develop and demonstrate implementation of a plan for growth in at least two focus areas
- Identify at least three specific relationships to support academic success (at least one peer and one faculty/staff)
- Demonstrate behaviors for developing and/or strengthening meaningful relationships for academic success
- Identify current strengths and areas for focus related to the six dimensions of wellbeing
- Develop and demonstrate implementation of a plan for growth in at least two wellbeing focus areas
- Identify barriers (internal/external) impacting academic progress and describe personal strategies, university resources and/or processes to address barriers

Attendance & Participation (33%): ELN 2720 has been developed with a foundation for active, engaged learning in a cohort context. Your presence and participation supports your own success in this course, as well as supporting others in their success. If you have a planned conflict that will result in class absence, you are expected to communicate with your professor as soon as possible (preferable at least one week in advance). If you have an unplanned situation arise and you must be absent (illness, personal emergency, etc.), you are expected to communicate with your professor and any group mates as soon as you become aware you will need to miss class. Failure to effectively communicate with your instructor (and any group mates) prior to the start of class will impact your participation grade. Course instruction, activities, reflection, and feedback occur during class meetings. If you have an absence, you are expected to work with your classmates/ accountability partners to obtain notes and context regarding class topics and activities. Any readings, videos, and structured activities will be posted on Moodle.

Course Assignments (67%): Assignments and due dates will be posted in Moodle. All assignments must be submitted in Moodle by the due date/time listed. In general, assignments will be completed in class and submitted during or at the conclusion of the class. If you are absent and need to request an

extension of deadline due to an unexpected emergency situation, please provide specific information regarding your anticipated/requested timeline for completion. Approval for extensions are considered on a case-by-case basis. Repeated requests for extensions generally are not granted.

Week One: Meaningful Relationships

Class 1 (Information/Learning): Academic goals, building a constellation of mentors, types of relationships, looking back/looking forward

Class 2 (Action/Reflection): Developing a personal plan, partner brainstorm/feedback, group sharing

Week Two: Academic Strategies

Class 1 (Information/Learning): LASSI introduction and assessment

Class 2 (Action/Reflection): Goal-setting and a growth plan, small group discussion

Week Three: Wellness & Wellbeing

Class 1 (Information/Learning): Wellness Dimensions, Designing for Wellness

Class 2 (Action/Reflection): Revisiting goals, deepening strategies, accountability partners and plan

Week Four: Meaningful Relationships

Class 1 (Information/Learning): Vulnerability, authenticity, boundaries, conflict

Class 2 (Action/Reflection): Mapping relationship-acceleration opportunities, personal plan check-in

Week Five: Academic Strategies

Class 1 (Information/Learning): Working smarter (time, place, context); focus/energy activity

Class 2 (Action/Reflection): Group reflection; individual check-in time (student: instructor)

Week Six: Wellness & Wellbeing

Class 1 (Information/Learning): Physical wellbeing (eating, sleeping, movement); wellbeing schedule

Class 2 (Action/Reflection): Physical wellbeing activity; accountability partners check-in

Week Seven: Meaningful Relationships

Class 1 (Information/Learning): Academic/Professional Mentors- communication & connection

Class 2 (Action/Reflection): Personal plan check-in, mid-term academic goals review

Spring Break (March 25-31)

Week Eight (April 1-7): Academic Strategies

Week Nine (April 8-14): Wellness & Wellbeing

Week Ten (April 15-21): Meaningful Relationships

Week Eleven (April 22-28): Academic Strategies

Week Twelve (April 29-May 5): Wellness & Wellbeing

Week Thirteen (May 6-12): Meaningful Relationships/Academic Strategies

Appendix C: Cycle One - Pre-Assessment Survey Instrument (Week 1)

Last two letters of your middle name (e.g. Steve = VE)

Last two digits of your phone number (e.g. 336-867-5309 = 09)

First two letters of the town you grew up in (e.g. Elon = EL)

Thinking back on the fall semester, please answer the following questions:

Describe any concerns/experiences that negatively impacted your academic progress:

Describe any topics and/or supports you would like to learn about in ELN*2720:

Below are a series of statements that represent feelings toward Elon. Think about your relationships with the people in the Elon community and indicate the degree to which each statement is in line with your relationships. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer as honestly as possible. Not all students feel the same way or are expected to feel the same way.

<i>1 Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>2 Disagree</i>	<i>3 Slightly Disagree</i>	<i>4 Slightly Agree</i>	<i>5 Agree</i>	<i>6 Strongly Agree</i>
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	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The people of the Elon community pay attention to me.</i>						
<i>When people at Elon need help, they come to me.</i>						
<i>I have noticed that people at Elon will take the time to help me.</i>						
<i>My successes are a source of pride to the people of the Elon community.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community are concerned about my needs.</i>						
<i>There is no one at Elon who would share in my excitement about my accomplishments.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice me.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community count on me to be there in times of need.</i>						
<i>There are people of the Elon community who react to what happens to me in the same way they would if it happened to them.</i>						
<i>When I have a problem, people of the Elon community usually don't want to hear about it.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice when I come or go.</i>						
<i>I know people in the Elon community are sincerely interested in me.</i>						
<i>Often, the people of the Elon community trust me with things that are important to them.</i>						

<i>If I had a setback, there would be no one at Elon who would share in my feelings of unhappiness.</i>						
<i>There are people at Elon who give me advice when I need it.</i>						

Demographic Information:

Race/ethnicity identity (check all that apply):

- American Indian or Alaska Native** (e.g., Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Inupiat Traditional Gov't., etc.)
- Asian or Asian American** (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, Vietnamese, etc.)
- Black or African American** (e.g., Jamaican, Nigerian, Haitian, Ethiopian, etc.)
- Hispanic or Latino/a** (e.g., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Colombian, etc.)
- Middle Eastern or North African** (e.g., Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Israeli, Palestinian, etc.)
- Native Hawai'ian or Pacific Islander** (e.g., Samoan, Guamanian, Chamorro, Tongan, etc.)
- White or European** (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc.)
- Prefer not to disclose**
- My race or ethnicity is best described as:** *(Use text box and/or select categories above.)*

Gender:

- Woman
- Man
- Trans*
- Non-binary/Genderfluid
- Prefer not to disclose
- Specified below:

Estimated Family Income (annual combined income for all parents/guardians/household):

- \$0 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$149,999
- \$150,000 - \$199,999
- \$200,000 - above
- Prefer not to disclose

Appendix D: Cycle One - Mid- and Late-Course Survey Instrument (Week 4 and 12)

Last two letters of your middle name (e.g. Steve = VE)

Last two digits of your phone number (e.g. 336-867-5309 = 09)

First two letters of the town you grew up in (e.g. Elon = EL)

Thinking back on the concerns/experiences that negatively impacted your academic progress in the fall, please answer the following questions:

Describe any concerns/experiences this course has helped to improve:

Describe any concerns/experiences this course has not yet helped to improve:

Please share any ideas/feedback to help improve this course in the future:

Estimated Current GPA:

Below are a series of statements that represent feelings toward Elon. Think about your relationships with the people in the Elon community and indicate the degree to which each statement is in line with your relationships. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer as honestly as possible. Not all students feel the same way or are expected to feel the same way.

<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Slightly Disagree</i>	<i>Slightly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The people of the Elon community pay attention to me.</i>						
<i>When people at Elon need help, they come to me.</i>						
<i>I have noticed that people at Elon will take the time to help me.</i>						
<i>My successes are a source of pride to the people of the Elon community.</i>						

<i>People of the Elon community are concerned about my needs.</i>						
<i>There is no one at Elon who would share in my excitement about my accomplishments.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice me.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community count on me to be there in times of need.</i>						
<i>There are people of the Elon community who react to what happens to me in the same way they would if it happened to them.</i>						
<i>When I have a problem, people of the Elon community usually don't want to hear about it.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice when I come or go.</i>						
<i>I know people in the Elon community are sincerely interested in me.</i>						
<i>Often, the people of the Elon community trust me with things that are important to them.</i>						
<i>If I had a setback, there would be no one at Elon who would share in my feelings of unhappiness.</i>						
<i>There are people at Elon who give me advice when I need it.</i>						

Appendix E: Cycle One - End-of-Course Survey Instrument (Week 15)

Last two letters of your middle name (e.g. Steve = VE)

Last two digits of your phone number (e.g. 336-867-5309 = 09)

First two letters of the town you grew up in (e.g. Elon = EL)

Thinking back on the concerns/experiences that negatively impacted your academic progress in the fall, please answer the following questions:

Describe any concerns/experiences this course has helped to improve:

Describe any concerns/experiences this course did help to improve:

Please share any ideas/feedback to help improve this course in the future:

Anticipated/Final Spring Term GPA: (Note: If grades have not yet been posted, please list your best guess for your final GPA.)

Below are a series of statements that represent feelings toward Elon. Think about your relationships with the people in the Elon community and indicate the degree to which each statement is in line with your relationships. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer as honestly as possible. Not all students feel the same way or are expected to feel the same way.

1 <i>Strongly Disagree</i>	2 <i>Disagree</i>	3 <i>Slightly Disagree</i>	4 <i>Slightly Agree</i>	5 <i>Agree</i>	6 <i>Strongly Agree</i>
-------------------------------	----------------------	-------------------------------	----------------------------	-------------------	----------------------------

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>The people of the Elon community pay attention to me.</i>						
<i>When people at Elon need help, they come to me.</i>						
<i>I have noticed that people at Elon will take the time to help me.</i>						
<i>My successes are a source of pride to the people of the Elon community.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community are concerned about my needs.</i>						
<i>There is no one at Elon who would share in my excitement about my accomplishments.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice me.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community count on me to be there in times of need.</i>						
<i>There are people of the Elon community who react to what happens to me in the same way they would if it happened to them.</i>						
<i>When I have a problem, people of the Elon community usually don't want to hear about it.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice when I come or go.</i>						
<i>I know people in the Elon community are sincerely interested in me.</i>						
<i>Often, the people of the Elon community trust me with things that are important to them.</i>						
<i>If I had a setback, there would be no one at Elon who would share in my feelings of unhappiness.</i>						
<i>There are people at Elon who give me advice when I need it.</i>						

Demographic Information:

Race/ethnicity identity (check all that apply):

- American Indian or Alaska Native** (e.g., Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Inupiat Traditional Gov't., etc.)
- Asian or Asian American** (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, Vietnamese, etc.)
- Black or African American** (e.g., Jamaican, Nigerian, Haitian, Ethiopian, etc.)
- Hispanic or Latino/a** (e.g., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Colombian, etc.)
- Middle Eastern or North African** (e.g., Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Israeli, Palestinian, etc.)
- Native Hawai'ian or Pacific Islander** (e.g., Samoan, Guamanian, Chamorro, Tongan, etc.)
- White or European** (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc.)
- Prefer not to disclose**

- My race or ethnicity is best described as:** *(Use text box and/or select categories above.)*

Gender:

Woman

Man

Trans*

Non-binary/Genderfluid

Prefer not to disclose

Specified below:

Estimated Family Income (annual combined income for all parents/guardians/household):

\$0 - \$49,999

\$50,000 - \$99,999

\$100,000 - \$149,999

\$150,000 - \$199,999

\$200,000 - above

Prefer not to disclose

Appendix F: Initial Email Communication to Eligible Student Participants

Subject: Spring Term Academic Success Course- ELN*2720: Elon Rebound

Good afternoon,

I hope this message finds you well. I am reaching out to share information regarding a new academic success course Elon University is piloting for the spring semester. **ELN*2720: *Elon Rebound*** is designed to support you in achieving your academic goals. Based on your fall semester academic progress, you will be enrolled in this course for the spring semester.

ELN*2720 is a 1-credit course that meets two times per week, with time dedicated within the class sessions for individualized guidance. This course provides holistic academic support and guidance for students who have experienced barriers impacting their academic progress and success. Through an intentional cohort experience, students will identify personal goals, develop an action plan, and implement academic success strategies. Course curriculum focuses on enhancing academic skills, building meaningful relationships for academic success, strengthening holistic wellbeing, and addressing barriers to academic progress.

The activities and supports provided through this course are intended to help you return to good academic standing and to thrive at Elon University. We want to help you achieve your goals and build a foundation for great success in the years to come!

We will review your spring course schedule and enroll you in a section that aligns with your academic schedule. You will receive additional information in mid-January regarding your course section, instructor, and more details regarding the course. If you have already finalized plans to be away from Elon University for the spring semester, please reply to this email by Friday, January 5th to be removed from future email updates.

If you have any immediate questions, please do not hesitate to email me at wgregory@elon.edu.

Best wishes,

Whitney Gregory
Assistant Dean of Students

Appendix G: Enrollment Notification Email to Eligible Student Participants

Subject: ELN*2720: Elon Rebound

Hello everyone!

I am following-up to share a few updates regarding ELN*2720: Elon Rebound. You have now been enrolled in one of the spring sections. Please log-in to OnTrack to see your course information and instructor. You will receive an email from your instructor later this week with more details.

In the meantime, I wanted to share a few highlights regarding this academic success course:

- Activities, readings, and assignments occur primarily during class time. Elon Rebound provides a supportive in-person structure for learning, growth, setting goals, working through hurdles, and creative problem-solving!
- Your input matters! You will have the opportunity to respond to several surveys to inform course topics and to share feedback on your experience. All surveys are completely optional, but we hope you will choose to complete them. Your participation helps us improve this course for you and for future students!
- No additional cost! The cost of this course is included in your tuition. No extra fees and no books to buy!

I invite you to complete [this anonymous survey](#) (two questions, less than one minute). This information will be used to help design the course this spring. Responses from this survey may also be used in future research, but any information would be generalized and shared in aggregate.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about this message! Look for an email message from your Elon Rebound instructor later this week!

Whitney Gregory
Assistant Dean of Students

Appendix H: Cycle Two – First Week Survey Instrument

Last two letters of your middle name (e.g. Steve = VE)

Last two digits of your phone number (e.g. 336-867-5309 = 09)

First two letters of the town you grew up in (e.g. Elon = EL)

Describe any individual conditions/experiences that have negatively impacted your academic progress. Please be as specific as possible (e.g. physical health concerns, mental health concerns, personal or family emergency, difficulty with motivation, procrastination, etc.).

Describe any environmental/systemic issues or barriers that have negatively impacted your academic progress. (e.g. lack of resources, barriers to accessing resources, negative experience attempting to access supports, etc.)

Please indicate the topics you hope to focus upon during this class.

Cumulative GPA (for returning students)

Estimated GPA at Midterms

Anything else you would like to share with course instructor

Below are a series of statements that represent feelings toward Elon. Think about your relationships with the people in the Elon community and indicate the degree to which each statement is in line with your relationships. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer as honestly as possible. Not all students feel the same way or are expected to feel the same way.

<i>1</i> <i>Strongly</i> <i>Disagree</i>	<i>2</i> <i>Disagree</i>	<i>3</i> <i>Slightly Disagree</i>	<i>4</i> <i>Slightly Agree</i>	<i>5</i> <i>Agree</i>	<i>6</i> <i>Strongly Agree</i>
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	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The people of the Elon community pay attention to me.</i>						
<i>When people at Elon need help, they come to me.</i>						
<i>I have noticed that people at Elon will take the time to help me.</i>						
<i>My successes are a source of pride to the people of the Elon</i>						

<i>community.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community are concerned about my needs.</i>						
<i>There is no one at Elon who would share in my excitement about my accomplishments.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice me.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community count on me to be there in times of need.</i>						
<i>There are people of the Elon community who react to what happens to me in the same way they would if it happened to them.</i>						
<i>When I have a problem, people of the Elon community usually don't want to hear about it.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice when I come or go.</i>						
<i>I know people in the Elon community are sincerely interested in me.</i>						
<i>Often, the people of the Elon community trust me with things that are important to them.</i>						
<i>If I had a setback, there would be no one at Elon who would share in my feelings of unhappiness.</i>						
<i>There are people at Elon who give me advice when I need it.</i>						

Demographic Information:

Race/ethnicity identity (check all that apply):

- American Indian or Alaska Native** (e.g., Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Inupiat Traditional Gov't., etc.)
- Asian or Asian American** (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, Vietnamese, etc.)
- Black or African American** (e.g., Jamaican, Nigerian, Haitian, Ethiopian, etc.)
- Hispanic or Latino/a** (e.g., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Colombian, etc.)
- Middle Eastern or North African** (e.g., Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Israeli, Palestinian, etc.)
- Native Hawai`ian or Pacific Islander** (e.g., Samoan, Guamanian, Chamorro, Tongan, etc.)
- White or European** (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc.)
- Prefer not to disclose**
- My race or ethnicity is best described as:** *(Use text box and/or select categories above.)*

Gender:

- Woman
- Man
- Trans*
- Non-binary/Genderfluid
- Prefer not to disclose
- Specified below:

Estimated Family Income (annual combined income for all parents/guardians/household):

- \$0 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$149,999
- \$150,000 - \$199,999

\$200,000 - above
 Prefer not to disclose

Appendix I: Cycle Two – Mid-Course Survey Instrument

Last two letters of your middle name (e.g. Steve = VE)

Last two digits of your phone number (e.g. 336-867-5309 = 09)

First two letters of the town you grew up in (e.g. Elon = EL)

Describe any concerns/experiences this course has helped to improve. Please be as specific as possible (e.g. lack of resources, physical/mental health concerns, personal or family emergency, difficulty with motivation, procrastination, etc.).

Describe any concerns/experiences this course has not yet helped to improve.

Anything else you would like to share with course instructor.

Below are a series of statements that represent feelings toward Elon. Think about your relationships with the people in the Elon community and indicate the degree to which each statement is in line with your relationships. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer as honestly as possible. Not all students feel the same way or are expected to feel the same way.

<i>1</i> <i>Strongly</i> <i>Disagree</i>	<i>2</i> <i>Disagree</i>	<i>3</i> <i>Slightly Disagree</i>	<i>4</i> <i>Slightly Agree</i>	<i>5</i> <i>Agree</i>	<i>6</i> <i>Strongly Agree</i>
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	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The people of the Elon community pay attention to me.</i>						
<i>When people at Elon need help, they come to me.</i>						
<i>I have noticed that people at Elon will take the time to help me.</i>						
<i>My successes are a source of pride to the people of the Elon community.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community are concerned about my needs.</i>						
<i>There is no one at Elon who would share in my excitement about my accomplishments.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice me.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community count on me to be there in times of need.</i>						

<i>There are people of the Elon community who react to what happens to me in the same way they would if it happened to them.</i>						
<i>When I have a problem, people of the Elon community usually don't want to hear about it.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice when I come or go.</i>						
<i>I know people in the Elon community are sincerely interested in me.</i>						
<i>Often, the people of the Elon community trust me with things that are important to them.</i>						
<i>If I had a setback, there would be no one at Elon who would share in my feelings of unhappiness.</i>						
<i>There are people at Elon who give me advice when I need it.</i>						

Appendix J: Cycle Two – End-of-Course Survey

Last two letters of your middle name (e.g. Steve = VE)

Last two digits of your phone number (e.g. 336-867-5309 = 09)

First two letters of the town you grew up in (e.g. Elon = EL)

Describe any concerns/experiences this course helped to improve. Please be as specific as possible (e.g. lack of resources, physical/mental health concerns, personal or family emergency, difficulty with motivation, procrastination, etc.).

Describe any concerns/experiences this course did not help to improve. Please be as specific as possible.

Please share any ideas/feedback to help improve this course in the future.

Anything else you would like to share about this course:

Below are a series of statements that represent feelings toward Elon. Think about your relationships with the people in the Elon community and indicate the degree to which each statement is in line with your relationships. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer as honestly as possible. Not all students feel the same way or are expected to feel the same way.

1 <i>Strongly Disagree</i>	2 <i>Disagree</i>	3 <i>Slightly Disagree</i>	4 <i>Slightly Agree</i>	5 <i>Agree</i>	6 <i>Strongly Agree</i>
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	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>The people of the Elon community pay attention to me.</i>						
<i>When people at Elon need help, they come to me.</i>						
<i>I have noticed that people at Elon will take the time to help me.</i>						
<i>My successes are a source of pride to the people of the Elon community.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community are concerned about my needs.</i>						
<i>There is no one at Elon who would share in my excitement about my accomplishments.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice me.</i>						
<i>People of the Elon community count on me to be there in times of need.</i>						
<i>There are people of the Elon community who react to what happens</i>						

<i>to me in the same way they would if it happened to them.</i>						
<i>When I have a problem, people of the Elon community usually don't want to hear about it.</i>						
<i>Most people of the Elon community seem to notice when I come or go.</i>						
<i>I know people in the Elon community are sincerely interested in me.</i>						
<i>Often, the people of the Elon community trust me with things that are important to them.</i>						
<i>If I had a setback, there would be no one at Elon who would share in my feelings of unhappiness.</i>						
<i>There are people at Elon who give me advice when I need it.</i>						

Demographic Information:

Race/ethnicity identity (check all that apply):

- American Indian or Alaska Native** (e.g., Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Inupiat Traditional Gov't., etc.)
- Asian or Asian American** (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, Vietnamese, etc.)
- Black or African American** (e.g., Jamaican, Nigerian, Haitian, Ethiopian, etc.)
- Hispanic or Latino/a** (e.g., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Colombian, etc.)
- Middle Eastern or North African** (e.g., Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Israeli, Palestinian, etc.)
- Native Hawai'ian or Pacific Islander** (e.g., Samoan, Guamanian, Chamorro, Tongan, etc.)
- White or European** (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc.)
- Prefer not to disclose**
- My race or ethnicity is best described as:** *(Use text box and/or select categories above.)*

Gender:

- Woman
- Man
- Trans*
- Non-binary/Genderfluid
- Prefer not to disclose
- Specified below:

Estimated Family Income (annual combined income for all parents/guardians/household):

- \$0 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$149,999
- \$150,000 - \$199,999
- \$200,000 - above
- Prefer not to disclose