Research Note

A Policy Discourse Analysis of Academic Probation in Dominican Universities

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An issue universities encounter is students not meeting institutional academic requirements, otherwise termed minimum grade point averages. As part of the solution to the aforementioned problem, institutions rely on academic probation policies to inform retention practices. These policies belong to a long history of student grouping and classification based on academic institutional requirements. Although the emergence of academic probation is unclear, it can be traced in research since the 1920s (Held, 1941; May, 1923; Reeder, 1942; Stone, 1920). In the present, academic probation is still considered a policy that groups and classifies students based on institutional academic requirements (Arcand & Leblanc, 2012; Arcand, 2013).

Previous research has approached students' perspectives with academic probation and has found that these are affected in terms of their beliefs in their academic capabilities, and has emotional repercussions (Barouch, 2017; Duffy, 2010; Sage, 2010). Nevertheless, understanding how policies guide institutional behavior and its intentional and unintended consequences might be helpful. Studies related to academic probation policies and their role as a solution to the issue of students not meeting institutional academic requirements are scarce. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to uncover the recurring themes of academic probation policies in Dominican universities.

Theoretical Framework

Power

Power "is produced and transmitted through knowledge and discourse at the micro level of society," while at the macro level "ideologies, structures and institutions" are used to focus and transmit power (Iverson 2010, p.196). Power can be exercised through techniques of *surveillance* (use of experts to monitor and increase efficiency), *(self)regulation* (explicit use of regulation to invoke a rule, often through the use of rewards and punishment), *normalization* (comparisons to invoke conformity to a standard), and *classification* (ways in which groups and individuals are differentiated from one another through sorting and ranking of identity statuses) (Iverson, 2010).

Method

Policy analysis is considered a combination of "critical approaches with methods of textual analysis that allows for an analysis of text that focuses on silences and exclusions, while at the same time giving voice to those at the margins" (Iverson, 2010, p. 195). The method for this

Table 1

Academic Probation Policies and Institutions

Institution	Academic Probation Policies *(location)*
Institution 1	Academic Handbook 2017
Institution 2	Academic Handbook 1998
Institution 3	Academic Handbook 2008
Institution 4	Academic Handbook 2016
Institution 5	Academic Handbook 2014
Institution 6	Academic Handbook 2016
Institution 7	Academic Handbook 2014
Institution 8	Academic Handbook 2001
Institution 9	Academic Handbook 2013
Institution 10	Academic Handbook 2018

study, policy discourse analysis, "recognizes that policy-as-discourse creates structures and practices that define, support, enforce, and constrain both liberatory and repressive realities and experiences for diverse individuals and groups" (Iverson, 2005, p. 39). Data consisted of academic probation policies available online from ten higher education institutions in the Dominican Republic (see Table 1). Data was analyzed through deductive coding.

Results

Dominant Discourses of Academic Probation Policies in Dominican Higher Education

The analysis of academic probation policies at ten Dominican universities demonstrated techniques of surveillance, normalization, (self)regulation, and classification, as described by Iverson (2010).

Surveillance

Out of the ten institutions, only three mentioned orientation personnel as part of the support system (e.g., Institution 6) available to students. From these policies, it can be assumed that these "specialists" are the only personnel students can rely on to meet academic requirements. At times, visits to these "specialists" were mandatory, in other cases optional, recommended, or unclear (e.g., Institutions 4, 7). Other assumptions arose such as the lack of mentioning support personnel across majority of universities in these policies, which convey that the students have no one to rely on. Further, these students were constructed as lacking capabilities—their abilities being below average—and dependent upon others to meet academic requirements.

(Self)Regulation

The use of punishment was found consistently throughout the ten policies. The policy

documents focused on current and future punishments, rather than assisting students to meet academic requirements. Examples of consequences include a) are not being able to graduate with honors (e.g., Institution 5), b) having to take less credit hours/courses than what a "normal" student could (e.g., Institution 3), c) being separated from the institution in short/long terms or permanently (e.g., Institutions 2, 4, 5), and d) not being able to graduate at all (e.g., Institution 9).

Normalization

A reputation of academic excellence (e.g., Institution 1) guided the re/affirmation of these norms. A common reference point among the institutions was the minimum academic term and/or cumulative grade point average requirement, or GPA, of 2.0. This numerical grade is considered a letter grade of C, or "average" (e.g., Institutions 8, 1, 6). Although these "average" students—like their peers—are part of the institution, they do not have same conditions as other students. Therefore, an assumption coming from the research is that these students are considered temporary, dependent on meeting established norms. Further, positive and negative sanctions uphold the norms and expectations that have been established; an example of this is negative sanctions being clearly stated, but no justified (e.g., Institution 10). This allows for resulting classification practices to be upheld as well.

Classification

Academic probation policies classify students as "normal or on academic probation" (e.g., institution 4). Classifying students fosters a "them" condition in relation to a "normal" student. This mode of classification aligns with the normative standards established, which use letter- and number-based systems to further differentiate how a student should be labeled. Those that end up in any category considered to be below average are subsequently labeled as such, and are subject to punitive sanctions. These policies reaffirm the institutional position by making the classification present in the students' academic transcripts even though the student at some point met the academic requirements and is considered in "normal standing" (e.g. Institution 1).

Discussion and Conclusion

Overviewing the history of academic probation (Held, 1941; May, 1923; Reeder, 1942; Stone, 1920) and furthering previous research (Barouch, 2017; Duffy, 2010; Sage, 2010), the goal of this research was to explore the discourse surrounding academic probation policies. Findings confirm the presence of surveillance, normalization, self-regulation, and classification throughout these policies, per the work of Iverson (2010). The policy implications for this work acknowledge that the populations that do not meet academic requirements are likely similar to the populations that were once excluded from higher education. This means addressing the assumptions that are behind the normative standards in place, and questioning the ways in which they are truly focused on assisting students to meet academic requirements. Future policy revisions should address the punitive measures, the implications of being classified below "normal," and reorient focus on institutional retention.

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