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IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ACADEMIC PROGRESS POLICY AT A PUBLIC URBAN UNIVERSITY: A REVIEW AFTER FOUR YEARS

by William Bennett and Barbara Grothe

Six years ago, the term "academic progress" was introduced into federal financial aid legislation. Section 132 of the Higher Education Amendments of 1976 added a new subsection to 497 of the Higher Education Act of 1965. This subsection stipulated that a student may receive financial assistance under Title IV only if satisfactory progress toward a degree is being made in his or her course of study. The legislation did not define precisely the meaning of "satisfactory progress." However, the comment section of the Interim Final Regulations as published in 1978 offers a degree of clarification regarding the intent of the legislation:

In setting standards of satisfactory progress, an institution is attempting to evaluate a student's efforts to achieve an educational goal within a given period of time. To make this evaluation, the institution needs to establish a normal time frame for completing the course of study, and it must have some means, such as grades or work completed which can be measured against a norm.

During the academic year 1975-76 the financial aid office of Cleveland State University anticipated the federal legislation and developed an academic progress policy for its financial aid recipients. Cleveland State is an urban institution, located in the heart of the city. The institution serves approximately 20,000 students whose ages range from 18 to 67 and who are enrolled in 80 degree programs at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels. Approximately 80% of the students at CSU are employed on either a part-time or full-time basis. Consequently, these students may be enrolled on either a full-time or part-time basis, including a skeleton schedule of one course per quarter.

In an attempt to relate the generalized federal guidelines to the diverse student population at CSU, we sought to develop a cogently structured academic progress policy. Beginning in the Fall of 1976, academic progress was monitored in accordance with the following policy statement:

Financial aid recipients must complete the minimum hour requirement which is shown for each quarter on the Award Offer. Failure to complete the minimum hour requirement in any one quarter will result in a warning to the student about potential loss of financial aid. Students who fail to meet the minimum hour requirement three times will have their financial aid award adjusted to the amount of tuition/fees until their dropping patterns are clarified with the Director of Financial Aid.

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Students who are denied financial aid because of their failure to maintain satisfactory progress may enroll, if academically eligible, for courses at their own expense until reaching the minimum number of hours for which aid was previously awarded. Upon completion of the required hours, these students will be reconsidered for financial aid for the upcoming quarter. The maximum amount of funds available will be tuition assistance.

After the fourth year of implementing this policy, it was decided that the impact of the policy should be reviewed and evaluated. This article reports the results of that investigation. Attention will be focused upon the following five dimensions of that investigation:

- (1) The methodology used in identifying the students affected by the academic progress policy (this group will hereafter be referred to as the "test group")
- (2) The characteristics distinguishing this subgroup from the general financial aid population
- (3) Possible misuse of Title IV federal funds by the test group
- (4) Benefits of the policy for the test group
- (5) The future and further implementation of the academic progress policy

I. Methodology

Fortunately, a normal financial aid office procedure provided the basis for identifying the test group. Each quarter a computer program compares the financial aid file with the Registrar's file. This comparison locates those students who drop below the minimum hour requirement which the financial aid office sets for the quarter and the program keeps a record of the number of times a student drops while he or she is in attendance at Cleveland State. A follow-up letter reminds a student of the academic progress policy in effect at Cleveland State. If aid is withdrawn a revised award is also mailed to the student.

When it was decided that a review should be made of the effects of the academic progress policy, a computer tape was created which included the records of all those students (N = 3,329) who had dropped below the minimum hour requirement one or more times during any quarter over the previous four academic years (1976-77, 1977-78, 1978-79 and 1979-80).

II. Characteristics

Of the 3,329 students in the test group, 69% dropped below the minimum hour requirement just once; 21% dropped two times; 8% dropped three times and had their aid reduced to tuition only; and 2% dropped more than three times and had their aid withdrawn. Regarding the academic status of the test group at the end of the four-year period, 13% graduated; 18% were academically dismissed; 16% were continuing their education at Cleveland State; and the remaining 53% were not in attendance at this institution during the 1979-80 school year. Table 1 reflects this data.

Table 1

**Distribution of Test Group By
A) Number of Times Student Dropped and
B) Current Academic Status**

A. Number of Times Student Dropped			B. Current Academic Status		
Number of Drops	Number of Students	Graduated	Academic Dismissal	Attending 79-80	Not Attending 79-80
One	2293	327	414	453	1099
Two	718	87	125	71	435
Three	253	22	45	18	168
Four or More	65	1	6	4	54
TOTAL	3329	437	590	546	1756

A clearer picture of the test group emerges when it is compared to the 1979-80 pool of financial aid recipients. As Table 2 indicates, with regard to such variables as age and sex, the test group mirrors the financial aid population. With regard to race, there was a lower representation of whites in the test group and a higher representation of blacks. The remaining minority groups reflected the distribution of the total financial aid population. With regard to college, Table 3 shows that there was a higher representation of Arts and Science students and Division of Special Studies students. The latter division provides academic support, counseling and tutorial services for students who are academically underprepared, physically handicapped or limited in their English speaking ability. There was a lower representation of Engineering, Education, Law and Graduate students in the test group. Finally, with regard to academic status (Table 4), there was a higher representation in the test group of students with accumulative grade points below 2.5 (on a 4.0 scale) and 43% of the test group was either on probation or academically dismissed.

Table 2

A) Distribution of Test Group By Age, Sex, and Race
 B) Comparison of Test Group to 1979-80 Pool of Financial Aid Recipients

Number of Times Student Dropped	Age				Sex		Race				
	18-22	23-30	31-40	41+	Male	Female	Black	American Indian	Oriental	Spanish	White
One	918	1072	232	71	1090	1203	1101	6	14	27	1145
Two	243	343	105	27	334	384	370	1	6	20	321
Three	56	150	35	12	141	112	134	1	6	3	109
Four or More	15	37	11	2	25	40	49				16
Test Group Totals	1232	1602	383	112	1590	1739	1654	8	26	50	1591
Percent of Test Group	37%	48.1%	11.5%	3.4%	47.8%	52.2%	49.7%	.2%	.8%	1.5%	47.8%
Percent of 1979-80 Financial Aid Recipients	32%	50.7%	13.2%	4.1%	47.4%	52.6%	29.1%	.3%	1%	1.8%	67.8%

Table 3

A) Distribution of Test Group By College
 B) Comparison of Test Group to 1979-80 Pool of Financial Aid Recipients

Number of Times Student Dropped	Div. Of							
	Arts & Science	Business	Education	Special Studies	Engineering	First College	Urban Studies	Graduate Law
One	887	468	132	490	149	47	19	25
Two	294	155	35	124	36	17	6	8
Three	103	51	14	39	11	2	2	2
Four or More	37	17	5	4	1		1	
TEST GROUP TOTALS	1321	691	186	657	197	66	28	35
Percent of Test Group	39.7%	20.8%	5.6%	19.7%	5.9%	2.0%	.8%	1.1%
Percent of 1979-80 Financial Aid Recipients	32.3%	17.8%	8.7%	10.7%	8.0%	2.1%	.9%	9.0%
								10.5%

Table 4

A) Distribution of Test Group By Grade Point
 B) Comparison of Test Group to 1979-80
 Pool of Financial Aid Recipients

A.

Number of Times Student Dropped	3.5 - 4.0	3.0 - 3.49	2.5 - 2.99	Below 2.5
One	140	266	412	1475
Two	43	106	113	456
Three	21	24	44	164
Four or More	—	2	6	57
TEST GROUP TOTALS	204	398	575	2152

B.

Percent of Test Group	6.1%	12.0%	17.3%	64.6%
Percent of 1979-80 Financial Aid Recipients	16.1%	20.6%	18.1%	45.2%

To study the variables of dependency status and family income in an era of inflation we decided to identify those students who dropped during the 1979-80 school year and compare the family incomes of this "test subgroup" to the family incomes of the pool of 1979-80 financial aid recipients. Of the 3,329 students in the test group, 1,119 students dropped during the 1979-80 school year. Table 5 reflects the income distribution within the categories of dependency status of these 1,119 students. It was found there was a higher representation of independent students in the test group. However, the income distribution of these independent students again mirrored the total financial aid population. There were fewer dependent students in the test group. These dependent students had slightly lower family incomes than the dependent students from the pool of financial aid recipients.

Table 5

A) Distribution By Dependency Status and Income
 of 1979-80 Students Who Dropped and
 B) Comparison of this group to the 1979-80 Pool
 of Financial Aid Recipients

Number of Times Student Dropped	Dependent					Independent		
	0-6000	6001 - 12000	12001 - 18000	18001 - 24000	24001 +	0-2500	2501 - 5000	5001 +
One	100	132	133	99	42	92	87	63
Two	33	58	40	25	7	37	40	29
Three	17	20	8	3	3	8	12	3
Four or More	7	7	3	3	1	4	0	3
Test Group Totals	157	217	184	130	53	141	139	98
B.								
Percent of Test Group	14%	19%	16%	12%	5%	13%	12%	9%
Percent of 1979-80 Financial Aid Recipients	12%	18%	19%	16%	8%	10%	10%	7%

III. Question of Misuse

Prior to the implementation of an academic progress policy, we questioned the possible misuse of Title IV federal funds by students. Were many students giving us "the sting" and registering for classes which they never intended to complete? Were many students merely registering in order to receive the expense check and then dropping their courses as soon as the check was in their hands? Our academic policy limits the opportunities for students to defraud the federal government or the university. As the policy reads, students could possibly take the money and run once, even twice. By the third time, if not before, the policy would have brought to our attention those students who might be reducing financial aid to a quick money making scheme. Our study suggests, however, that students tend to drop courses because of academic difficulties, not ethical deficiencies.

A closer look at the 2% of the test group who dropped classes more than three times, and whose financial aid had consequently been withdrawn, revealed that 38% of these students did not continue at Cleveland State. Their average accumulative grade point was 2.05. Occasionally, the withdrawal of financial aid coincided with the academic dismissal of the students. Much more frequently the students were either on academic probation or on the verge of academic dismissal when their aid was withdrawn. The statistics suggest that the withdrawal of funds normally coincides with academic dismissal or anticipates it by one or two quarters.

Fifty-eight percent of the students who had their financial aid withdrawn continued to register for classes at Cleveland State at their own expense. Usually, these students returned on a part-time basis, and 70% of them continued their pattern of dropping courses. Only four students who continued at their own expense actually graduated. The majority of continuing students who were denied aid either eventually dropped out or were academically dismissed.

Such data would seem to suggest that the heart of the problem is not student integrity but rather academic preparation, vocational clarity, and the ability to adjust successfully to both the academic and emotional challenges which confront college students.

IV. Advantages to Students

Low grades and a corresponding involvement with the academic probationary system characterize the test group. Evidence suggests that the struggles of these students extend well beyond the scope of an academic progress policy. What then can an academic progress policy achieve; or perhaps better said, of what benefit is an academic progress policy to students?

Our experience has shown that the letter which is sent to those students who drop below the minimum hour requirement for a given quarter can serve as a constructive warning signal to the students. This letter reminds the students of our academic progress policy and encourages them to evaluate their participation in the educational process at Cleveland State. The letter also emphasizes the students' accountability to themselves as well as to the university in their responsible use of public funds. Finally, the letter seeks to initiate a dialogue between the students and the university. The recipients of the letter are invited to submit a written statement explaining the reasons for dropping courses.

The dialogue takes on a greater significance with regard to those students who exhibit a continuing dropping pattern (i.e., more than three times). These students are required to have a personal interview with the director of financial aid. This interview can serve as an opportunity for students not only to map out a plan whereby they again become eligible for financial aid but also to sharpen their perspective on the struggles which have hindered their progress. The director can, at this point, facilitate access to any of the specialized support services available at the university including tutoring, personal, career or academic counseling, child care assistance,

minority or women's support groups, etc.

By sensitively as well as objectively implementing an academic progress policy, we believe that a financial aid office can offer both guidance to students and a model of interdepartmental cooperation to the university. Each student is more than a statistic. Each department is more than an administrative island. Even though the responsibility of administering a financial aid academic progress policy belongs to the financial aid office, others such as the registrar, counseling center, the various colleges and the students themselves are partners in the administration of that policy.

Summary

We feel that the development and the implementation of the academic progress policy at Cleveland State has been successful. We have closely monitored student aid recipients who drop courses and have consistently encouraged the responsible use of federal funds. The vast majority of students who receive financial aid complete the courses for which the aid is given. The few who do drop courses and are targeted by the academic progress policy do so occasionally but do not develop a pattern of dropping. The policy effectively provides such students with sufficient time to acclimate themselves to the learning environment of this institution. Most students who do exhibit a pattern of dropping courses and who have their aid reduced or withdrawn are struggling academically. These students tend to be among those whose progress is also being monitored under the university's academic standing policy. The financial aid office assumes a supportive stance toward such students and is ready, if the student is willing, to work toward reinstatement of full funding.

As we look toward the future and the further implementation of the policy, we plan to complement our vigilance with a more extended and explicit effort to express the University's genuine concern in the student's successful pursuit of his or her academic goals. To this end we will include in our initial warning letters a description of the fine supportive services which are available on campus, as well as the names and phone numbers of the specialized support personnel. We feel that by assuming a vigilant as well as a supportive stance we will be able to implement an academic progress policy in accord with the letter and the spirit of the federal regulations.