

## A Renewed Sense of Hope

### Career Exploration for Students on Academic Probation

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**Abstract:** Academic recovery programs and career exploration are often presented as mutually exclusive interventions. This study explores their intersection through the design and implementation of a credit-bearing career exploration course for students on academic probation at a public four-year university. Data collected from interviews and student artifacts suggest that career exploration contributed to sustained hope and optimism and an increase in positive self-talk. Additionally, participants demonstrated improved grade point averages (GPAs) and higher retention rates compared to peers. Results suggest that career planning enhances career self-efficacy and the success of students in the midst of academic recovery.

**Keywords:** career exploration, academic probation, academic recovery, career self-efficacy

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Underachievement in college students is often attributed to boredom in learning (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Sharp et al., 2017), concern for the opinion of peers (Filade et al., 2019; Natale, 1995), performance or test anxiety (Harris & Coy, 2003; Rana & Mahmood, 2010; von der Embse et al., 2018), and inadequacies in time management (Agormedah et al., 2022; Appleby, 2006; Balduf, 2009; Lee, 2017; Panek, 2013; Tinto, 1993; Wolters & Brady, 2020). Others point to a lack of preparedness to meet the increased rigor and expectations of the college curriculum (Appleby, 2006; Earl, 1988; Haycock & Huang, 2001; Johnson et al., 2022). There is also an established correlation between a lack of interest in college major and underachievement in college, particularly for women (Lee, 2017; Rocconi et al., 2020).

When college students experience academic difficulty, they often face institutional policies that may hinder or threaten their ability to persist to graduation. Of these, the academic probation standing policies are among the most ubiquitous in higher education (Hoover, 2014). Academic probation parameters vary by institution, but many explicitly name a cumulative grade point average (GPA) below 2.0 as a defining factor (Cruise, 2002). Similarly, interventions designed to support students on academic probation differ by institution. However, there are common intervention designs, including academic success courses (McGrath & Burd, 2012; Shea, 2018) and intrusive academic advising models (Sims, 2019). The likelihood of persistence is lower for students placed on academic probation (Hoover, 2014). Therefore, intervention is critical for these students. While the range of contributing factors for academic difficulty varies, the consequences of academic probation policies are consistent across institutions. Students on academic probation are more likely to stop out or feel discouraged from returning to their institution (Fletcher &

Tokmouline, 2017; Lindo et al., 2010). Furthermore, at a cognitive level, the academic probation label influences how students see themselves, with demonstrated lower self-efficacy and weakened self-confidence in academic spaces (Barouch-Gilbert, 2016; Gordon, 2024; Kelley, 1996; Mosier, 2018; Multon et al., 1991).

Given the variation of mediating variables that lead to academic difficulty, students indicate a desire to receive intentional support from their institutions (Tovar & Simon, 2007). Existing academic recovery programs differ in size and format, but the goal of helping students navigate the academic expectations is consistent across programs (McGrath & Burd, 2012). One of the most common practices in academic recovery programs is offering a credit-bearing academic success course (Nordell, 2009). These courses often prove appealing to college students as a credit-bearing option, which may translate into a more serious investment in the experience by enrolled students (Hamman, 2014). Credit-bearing courses have demonstrated positive results with high program completion rates and a significant number of students recovering their academic standing (Kamphoff et al., 2007; McGrath, 2011; McGrath & Burd, 2012).

Historically, the support for the students on academic probation has focused primarily on academic skill building (Casey et al., 2018; Giampa & Symbaluk, 2018; Green, 1976; Hamman, 2014; Lipsky & Ender, 1990). Unlike their peers who demonstrated higher academic performance, college students experiencing academic difficulty do not receive the same level of support in career development. Instead, remediation focuses on addressing academic deficiencies (Jackson et al., 2011). However, research has revealed that students experiencing academic difficulty stand to benefit significantly from career development (Jackson & Healy, 1996; Loughhead et al., 1995; Salleh et al., 2013).

The population of students experiencing academic difficulty faces psychological and emotional challenges in the career development process due to the academic probation label (Erazo, 2017; Leblanc, 2012). Of growing concern is the diminished self-efficacy of students who have experienced an academic setback compared to high-achieving peers. This assumption of inadequacy is likely to affect the career decision-making process and self-perception of ability to succeed (Schnorr & Ware, 2001). Other studies have echoed this concern, stating that students experiencing academic difficulty assume they possess limited future career opportunities compared to their high-achieving peers (Salleh et al., 2013). With structural barriers in place, such as an inability to explore new majors while under probationary status and remedial coursework delaying graduation, students on academic probation may experience a decline in their motivation to persist (Barouch-Gilbert, 2022; Rojas, 2022; Sanabria et al., 2021). Career development can combat this by providing reflective experiences focusing on futuristic goals (Hughes et al., 2013).

When working with students experiencing academic difficulty, career development interventions offer the ability to focus support on psychological concerns, including motivation and self-efficacy (Grier-Reed et al., 2009). Furthermore, to combat feelings of deficiency when comparing themselves to high-achieving peers, research recommends that career development interventions for students experiencing academic difficulty

emphasize personal growth and strengths rather than group comparisons (Sapp, 2006; Schnorr & Ware, 2001).

Career development interventions have successfully improved academic performance, self-efficacy, and career maturity in the K-12 educational setting (Jackson et al., 2011; Legum & Hoare, 2004). To date, a limited number of studies seek to explore the impact of a career exploration intervention for college students experiencing academic difficulty. Hwang et al. (2014) demonstrated the benefit of career development for underachieving students, broadly defined as those whose current academic performance falls short of their demonstrated prior ability. This study expands upon those findings by designing and implementing a career exploration course for students on academic probation to assess the potential impact on career self-efficacy and academic outcomes and seek to understand the student experience within the course.

### **Context**

This study sought to enhance the support offered to college students experiencing academic difficulty as defined by the academic probation indicator, meaning the student's cumulative GPA fell below 2.00. The study site, Branchline University (a pseudonym), is a large public 4-year institution boasting just over 20,000 undergraduate students at the time of this study in Spring 2021. Approximately 3,000 undergraduate students are on academic probation or suspension at Branchline each year. Approximately 40% of students on probation are suspended (Institutional Data, 2020).

Scholars consistently connect an understanding of purpose and interest-major congruence to academic motivation, and by extension, success and retention (Robbins et al., 2006). However, at Branchline, the academic recovery program (ARP) primarily emphasizes other support areas, offering only minimal career development experiences. The ARP was created to bolster support for first-semester students experiencing academic difficulty. The program exists within the Center for Academic Excellence. Each fall and spring, ARP targets Branchline students on academic probation following their first semester at the university and provides intentional academic support to assist students in their return to good academic standing.

Since its inception, the ARP has evolved to strengthen the support offered to students on academic probation. As of Fall 2020, the program offered four options tailored for the diverse needs of its target population: a credit-bearing academic success seminar course, an eight-week academic success focus group, a non-credit-bearing asynchronous academic success course, and a peer mentor program. Eligible students were encouraged to work with their academic advisor to choose the best option amid time commitments and their academic course load.

While the variety of options accommodated diverse scheduling needs, at the time of this study, all four of the existing academic recovery options were limited in the type of support they offered. All program options addressed academic skill building and connection to the campus community and the resources within. This is not without justification. A lack of academic success skills including time management and study strategies continue to be

the most frequently cited factors attributed to declining academic performance by students and scholars (Ahmady et al., 2021; Astin, 1993; Balduf, 2009; Coleman & Freedman, 1996; Earl, 1988; Liu et al., 2024; Olson, 1990; Thombs, 1995; Tinto, 1993; Wilson et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2016). This is true for Branchline students also. Initial assessment data for the ARP students at the start of Spring 2020 indicated that 54% attributed their academic difficulty to time management concerns, while 27% reported a lack of effective study skills as a top factor in their performance in the previous semester (Institutional Data, 2020).

However, prioritizing only the necessary academic support, the program missed the opportunity to support students in career and major decision-making. Unlike their peers who demonstrated higher academic performance, students experiencing academic difficulty often do not receive the same level of support in career development (Arbona, 2000; Collins, 2010; Mandel & Marcus, 1988). Students experiencing academic difficulty may benefit from career counseling, with research indicating such experiences yield stronger GPAs and increased self-efficacy (Grier-Reed et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2011; Legum & Hoare, 2004). As Branchline's ARP was already well-established at the time of this study, the institution was well situated to implement and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation.

### **Course Design**

The course was taught in Spring 2021 in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. As such, it was implemented in a fully synchronous, online delivery using the Zoom platform. The design of the career exploration course was informed by existing literature demonstrating that a focus on self-exploration, reflection of individual purpose, and reflection of personal values can foster futuristic goal setting (Dik et al., 2011). Savickas (2012) posits that all career interventions should be oriented toward future selves and should allow participants to engage in activities where they may design their future career identities.

Exploration and reflection are considered important factors in career intervention literature (Folsom & Reardon, 2003; Ran et al., 2023; Son, 2018). As such, the course was designed utilizing existing career reflection activities introduced in the literature. The model set forth by Grier-Reed and Skaar (2010) with three larger themes guiding the intervention: reflection of past and present experiences, designing goals for the future, and the intentional planning and construction of action items toward achieving future goals. Like Grier-Reed and Skaar's (2010) model, the course utilized a strength-based philosophy with assignments designed to emphasize talents and strengths in the career decision-making process. Table 1 presents the weekly topics and activities within weeks two through nine of the intervention. Week one included the consent process and an overview of the study and course.

**Table 1.** *Weekly Topics and Assignments within the Career Development Intervention*

Theme	Week	Topic	Activities
Past & Present	2	Exploring our past/present; What do you value?	Values activity (Dik et al., 2011; Johnson, 2017); Career genograms (Storlie et al., 2019)
Past & Present	3	Exploring strengths; Exploring priorities	Strengths-based resume & narrative (Toporek & Cohen, 2016); Protect your time assignment Pre-Assessments (CDSE-SF; AMS-C)
Study Strategies	4	Academic thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, and strategies	LASSI assessment; interpretation of inventory results; Major mapping (Brooks, 2010)
Designing the Future	5	Life design thinking	Lifeview, Workview and Collegeview (Burnett & Evans, 2018)
Designing the Future	6	Meaningful work	Meaningful work statements (Johnson, 2017); Meaningful education statements
Designing the Future	7	Personal charter and personal responsibility	Life action planning (Johnson, 2017); personal responsibility manifestos
Career Planning	8	Planning for the future	Calling Connection; Odyssey Plans (Burnett & Evans, 2018)
Career Planning	9	Anticipating the obstacles	Mental contrasting with W.O.O.P. (Oettingen, 2015)

Common academic recovery elements of time management, study strategies, and goal setting were also embedded into the curriculum of the career exploration course. The activities in the course are designed to bridge academic and professional goals. As such, reflective activities asked students to apply course content to both contexts. In week three of the course, students examined their strengths related to professional and academic environments. In another example, students examined their current priorities to decipher

where they spend their time. Students then constructed an outline defining where and how they may dedicate time to their successful efforts in both contexts. A final example is the Workview, Lifeview, and Collegeview activities, adapted from the Lifeview activity designed by Burnett and Evans (2018). Students reflected on personal, professional, and academic goals. Reflection required students to consider where these goals fit into their current lifestyle and assess strategies to prioritize based on larger goals.

### **Method**

Participants were recruited through the ARP at Branchline University. The career exploration course was presented to prospective participants as one of the available options to fulfill the ARP expectation. During the ARP information session, a slide was presented to prospective students that differentiated the career exploration course from the traditional academic success option. The academic success course was explained as a space to explore time management and learning strategies with an introduction to campus resources. By contrast, the career exploration course was described as a course that would emphasize exploring career goals and individual purpose.

Students are never required to participate in the formal ARP. However, all eight undergraduate colleges communicate an expectation that students take advantage of the program when placed on academic probation. The information sessions informed students that choosing either the academic success or career exploration option would meet their college's expectations. All participants opted to enroll in the course. To assess participants' experience on academic probation as they participated in the career exploration course, semi-structured interviews were video and audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant engaged in two interviews over the course of the study. Additionally, with permission from the participants, the students' artifacts produced as part of the course were collected for further analysis.

In total, 24 undergraduate students enrolled in the course, ultimately filling the course section. Within the course, 15 consented to participate in the larger study. Of these, 11 were on academic probation. The remaining four had begun the term on academic probation but had utilized the COVID-19 revised academic policies to return to good academic standing by applying the retroactive Pass/No-Credit grading option. These four elected to remain in the course despite returning to good standing.

### **Data Analysis**

The career exploration course lasted 10 weeks. Participants in the study produced artifacts throughout. Initial interviews with participants occurred within the first three weeks of the semester, and second interviews occurred within the final two weeks of the course. In order to track the progression of student reflections and experiences, all data collected was divided into two groups based on the timing of submission. Artifacts submitted within the first five weeks of the term were analyzed together to understand student experiences at the beginning of the intervention. All artifacts submitted in the final five weeks of the course were also analyzed together to explore change over time as students progressed

through the reflective activities. The initial interview data were analyzed within the first five-week cluster, and the final interview was in the second cluster.

An iterative coding process was used to examine the student experience as part of the course. In the initial stage of open-coding, the data was broken down into smaller parts and then assigned codes. In axial coding, the second phase of analysis, those smaller codes identified in open-coding were examined to identify categories linking codes. Axial coding allowed for a wider analysis of all categories by making comparisons and identifying connections among individual participants. In the final phase of analysis, selective coding and linked codes were examined to identify patterns or larger themes. This iterative process allowed for a form of member checking. From this constant comparative coding method, larger themes or patterns emerged. Additionally, a narrative portrait of the student experience was developed for each participant. Participants were then given their written narrative describing the experiences captured during individual interviews and within their student artifacts. They were then asked to review and evaluate whether their experiences were adequately captured in the portrait and to provide feedback or clarity. This final form of member checking ensured an accurate understanding of their experiences in the study.

Finally, participants themselves chose a pseudonym with which they would appear in all written reporting to protect confidentiality. Their stories are presented below using those chosen pseudonyms.

## **Results**

### **Thematic Analysis**

Two larger themes were identified through the coding process regarding participants' experiences enrolled in the career exploration course while on academic probation. While students self-reported a decline in their academic motivation and difficulties navigating coursework overall, analysis of interview data and student artifacts reveals positive impacts of the course as part of students' academic recovery. These themes were renewed hope and optimism, and increased positive self-talk.

### ***Hope and Optimism***

As the semester progressed, participants described the increase in rigor and workload of their classes. Listening to these concerns in the classroom, it was suspected that the hope and optimism so prevalent in the early weeks of the course would diminish over time. However, the student artifacts and final interviews indicated that this hope and optimism were not only sustained throughout the course, but that by engaging in career reflection, these students felt a renewed sense of hope for their futures.

Early references to hope and optimism appear in the initial assessment, which participants completed prior to beginning the course. While this does not speak to their experiences as part of the course, their responses to specific open-ended questions indicated the participants' perspectives at the start of the term. When asked to define academic probation, Jim referred to it as a "second chance." He wrote:

To me academic probation is a way to let students know that they have been given a second chance to make their grades right in the following semester. Remember this is a second chance to get grades up and be a successful student.

Participants reported increased confidence in career goals as evidence that the course was a valuable experience. Their artifacts often spoke to a sense of hope for their future careers, even if they had not narrowed down the specific career path yet. As Ash described in his post-career assessment reflection:

By exploring other career options and our class discussions I have a better idea for my future. I also have a more positive outlook. I am excited for the future, and I believe that I will be okay.

A clear depiction of sustained hope and optimism exists in the analysis of individual participants from early artifacts and initial interviews to our final conversations and comments. In our initial interview, Jonah talked about how the uncertainty of his future made him anxious, an uncertainty that academic probation exacerbated. He did not like to think of the future often for this reason. It made him reflect on his current challenges that might impact his future. At the same time, he was excited to think about building a life after college and achieving personal and career goals once he had closed the book on academic ones. When asked how often he thought about those other goals, he answered that it depended on the day. When asked how he felt on the initial interview day, he said, “Good. More optimistic today.”

Jonah’s optimism came through at different points in the semester, particularly when he described a future with his girlfriend. In the final interview, when asked about his confidence level at that point in the semester, he said: “It’s definitely not the pit of despair I was in last spring, so I think the upward trend is there, which is encouraging.” One week later, Jonah submitted his post-career assessment reflection, where he referenced what he had learned about himself. His responses indicated growth and hope:

I learned to put value on the attributes and characteristics I've gained from my struggles and whether or not I'm happy with how I gained them I need to see their value. I also think that I've proven to myself my desire to be here [at Branchline].

Another student, Baki, felt that his performance in the previous semester was due to “laziness.” He was determined to change this. In his letter to himself at the start of the class, Baki wrote:

It’s the spring of your freshman year. You started off shaky, but you can recover. I didn’t take it seriously and became lazy not doing my work. Now you have turned it around and made change. It's not too late.

Baki engaged in positive behavior changes that significantly improved his academic performance. He kept me abreast of progress in his artifacts and in a check-in meeting in the middle of the term. By the time we connected for a final interview, Baki reported the changes he had seen in himself: “All my assignments and grades have improved a lot. I think I just feel more comfortable with my classes.”

Baki was not the only student who felt hopeful as a result of academic success that semester. Marigold struggled to balance schoolwork the previous semester while caring

for a family member, and started the term optimistic. In the early weeks of the career exploration course, she wrote, "Dear MARIGOLD, It is 2021. You are working towards your B.S. in biology. You have faced a lot of struggles the past year but a new chapter in your life is about to begin." Marigold implemented several behavior changes and maintained steady progress in her classes by staying ahead of assignments and seeking help often. The successes she scored early in the semester kept her motivated to continue these positive behaviors. After the final class, she noted her increased confidence and enthusiasm for the future in her post-career assessment reflection: "I am definitely more confident than beforehand. I am looking forward to my future career and am now more aware of [Branchline's] resources for me."

Like Marigold, Fiona rode the momentum of early successes, racking up even more wins as the semester progressed. She began the semester hopeful that the Spring 2021 term would be better than the previous one. In her letter to herself, Fiona documented these hopes:

You are on the path to redemption. I know it has been a super challenging year for you, last semester did not go as planned. Although you were struggling, I know that you will redeem yourself this semester and come back with 4.0 grades.

In a mid-semester meeting, Fiona walked me through each class to share her current grades and the projects she was working on. Fiona had worked hard, and her efforts continued to pay off with strong grades and positive reinforcement from her faculty members. In her personal charter, she noted how the career exploration course had affected her:

I got to learn more about myself, and what I wanted for my future. I believe that it only made me more confident when it comes to academic progress. I am a strong, independent young woman. I have so much to look forward to. I am glad this assignment helped me realize how exciting life will be, and why I am here today.

In some cases, the optimism participants described referenced more of a mindset change, like Ash, who was concerned about academic suspension and the fear of disappointing his family if this was the outcome of his Spring 2021 term. His letter to himself at the start of the course was both hopeful and clear. He wrote:

I know you think that your life is over, that you cannot come back from this, that you are a disappointment and a failure. Remember you still have a shot! You can flip the script. This is all only one barrier, a hurdle you can jump if you work hard. Just focus on staying in college and doing your best to prove to the University that one bad semester does not define you as a student and does not determine your future success.

I met with Ash at multiple points in the semester to check in. He was the only participant living on campus and experienced several required quarantine periods as others in the building reported exposure to COVID-19. As a highly social individual with a close connection to his family, these periods of forced isolation were mentally and emotionally draining. Ash often felt cut off from the world. He chose not to always share with his family when he was in quarantine because he knew they would worry and ask him to come home. Ash wanted to stay in the university area and attempt to have what he considered a

traditional first-year experience. He felt that the stress of isolation hindered his academic motivation. Knowing this was a constant challenge for Ash, I asked about his confidence in his ability to successfully finish the term in our final interview. He told me:

I want to get back in good standing but I'm OK if that doesn't happen this semester. I understand that it could be a longer process which is totally fine as long as it's, as long as you get there.

Tina also defined clear goals for turning things around in Spring 2021. She said in her protect your time action plan: "I am determined to set weekly and daily goals for myself. This will help me have a clearer picture of what needs to be done." By the end of the course, despite a significant setback, she reported a positive outlook and hope when she wrote in her post-career assessment reflection:

I'm happy that I've had the things that have happened to me, happen. I've grown as a person, I've learned many new things, my boyfriend and I have grown closer, and I've realized who my real friends are. I'm genuinely happy.

Participants often referenced looking ahead. At the start of the term, they overwhelmingly described future uncertainty and the anxious feelings that uncertainty generated. However, many were still optimistic, like Sofia, who referenced the many possibilities she could pursue in her letter to herself. She sustained that optimism, reporting in her personal charter: "This [class] helped me do a lot of digging into my major. I am excited to see where this degree will take me because I am 100% passionate about this career and I know I can do it."

Jim was also excited to look ahead. His initial assessment demonstrated hope. Toward the end of the class, in his final reflection on the odyssey plan assignment, he confirmed that this hope had endured: "The thing that excites me the most is that I am executing my first odyssey plan and I know that the 5 year plan will change but initially it will be the same goals."

Charlie had been focused on her happiness and mental health even before she enrolled in the course, and this continued throughout the course. Her "I am" statements at the midpoint of the course demonstrated this commitment:

I will be better at tracking my assignments and putting forth more effort towards my classes. I will get the help I need mentally to be able to succeed as best as I possibly can. I will learn what exactly I want to do with my education and career for my future. I will be happy. I will be strong. I will be present. I will be okay.

Of all the assignments, the strengths-based resume, which asked participants to create a document listing their positive traits and the ones they wished to work on, was the one Charlie found to be the most helpful. In her personal charter, she described why:

Learning about all of my strengths has impacted my academic career by allowing me to see where I thrive. I will carry this throughout the next phase in my life, because I have gained insight on my values and strengths.

That hope generated by articulating strengths proved helpful to many participants. Bertha entered the career exploration course following a semester of juggling her full-time student status with her full-time work schedule. She showed self-compassion in her letter

to herself in the early weeks of the term, writing: “You are beginning to feel mentally drained because you wear yourself too thin between school and work. It is okay to fail as long as you continue to try no matter what is placed in front of you.”

This optimism was sustained even when Bertha did not reach a point of clarity in the course. Still uncertain of what lies ahead, Bertha was excited for the future. As she wrote in her post-career assessment:

I am most definitely nervous; college is expensive, and I do not have the funds to just take random classes until I figure out something I like. Yet, I am also excited to see what/where I decide to do in my lifetime.

Among participants, hope and optimism endured. Even in the face of significant hardships experienced in the same term (Tina, Charlie, and Jonah) and academic setbacks, the participants spoke of the future from a place of hope and optimism. In final interviews, they noted improved mental and emotional states. Khloe said, “I feel good. I’m happy. I’m happier than how I was last year at this time.” C.C., frustrated by his academic difficulty when he had thrived in academic spaces for most of his life, had wrestled with the fear of failure and emerged more confident: “I definitely feel a lot better. When I found out that I had to do all this, [I thought] I may or may not pass college. I was considering a bunch of alternatives, but I feel better now.”

Even with perceived failure in the academic context, participants were optimistic that they would turn things around. This persistent hope manifested another interesting shift in qualitative data as the semester progressed. The academic probation outcome resulted in feelings of personal deficit. Participants at the start of the term were quick to point out their flaws. However, the negative self-talk I often heard in early interviews slowly abated, giving way to more hopeful self-perceptions. By the end of the term, participants frequently referenced their strengths and positive qualities, leading to the rise of the second most prevalent theme, a focus on career exploration, which yields powerful positive self-talk following setbacks in the academic context.

### ***Increase in Positive Self-Talk***

Early in the course assignments, participants were asked to articulate their strengths. However, long after these initial assignments, the artifacts they produced indicated a positive perception of self. In the Intriguing Questions assignment, participants listed traits they loved about themselves, like Baki, who wrote “I love hard, [I am] outgoing, [I am] passionate. I feel people truly enjoy my presence.” Bertha noted her “independent mindset” and the compassion she showed others. Like Bertha, Fiona celebrated her independence. Her response to this question of what she loved about herself also demonstrated self-compassion: “I like that I am a pretty confident person, and I know my worth. I do not settle for less. I also love that I am SO independent. I know I am doing my best, and I am enough.”

Bri listed five qualities that she valued in herself. She wrote: “5 things I love about myself: (1) My drive, if I push hard enough; (2) My attention to detail; (3) My friendliness; (4) My calmness; (5) My ability to adapt quickly.” Khloe also identified a list of traits she was proud

of when she wrote: "I love that I'm caring. I love that I'm a great listener so I'm usually the go-to person when someone wants to vent. I love that I stand up for what I believe in."

These responses required students to articulate positive traits or behaviors in the first course assignment. They described concrete actions or qualities, or in some cases, they made broader statements of appreciation, like Charlie, who wrote, "I love the way that I can exceed my own expectations." In this same assignment, participants were asked, "What are you awesome at already?" Here, they focused on specific behaviors they took pride in. Marigold responded: "Giving advice/solutions to problems, listening, prioritizing what's important to me." Whereas C.C. took pride in his ability to "find out how things work."

Jim knew his work ethic was admirable, a point he noted in his initial and final interviews. He also used his intriguing questions assignment to note that he could be counted on to "do my job very well and everything that entails." He also highlighted another point of pride when he wrote: "I believe I'm a really good balance of being book smart and common sense."

Jonah, as an adult learner, focused on his experiences and interests. He used this first assignment to highlight what he appreciated about himself: "I'm smart, I'm a jack of all trades, I have a lot of life experience for someone my age. I have a lot of hobbies." While Pablo documented his artistic passions specifically: "I am skilled at sculpting, I'm passionate for music and am a huge audiophile, I can play the guitar, love exercise, and I feel that when I am driven I do have a strong worth ethic." He was not alone in this. Tina also made a point to highlight her artistic side when she wrote: "I'm awesome at creating; I like to paint and do pretty much any craft under the sun."

Other instances of positive self-talk appeared in the letter to self assignment when participants offered words of encouragement to themselves. Marigold reminded herself: "You can do anything you choose to do. You are smart and competitive. You have great people skills and a passion for medicine."

Marigold was not the only participant to use this assignment to issue themselves important reminders as they began Spring 2021. Bri wrote to herself: "You are smart, hardworking, and thorough when you put your mind to it." Jim offered himself this succinct reminder: "I am hard working, smart and dedicated." C.C. reminded himself that if he committed to school, he would achieve his goals: "I know that you will commit to anything once you make it a priority, so try to make school a priority, and keep it there. Keep up some kind of academic momentum and you will succeed." Fiona left herself words of encouragement: "You are smart, just put time and effort into it and apply yourself! You are hardworking. You can do this."

Other participants made a point of referencing their recent setback. Tina, who had earned more than 100 credit hours total at three other institutions prior to transferring to Branchline but was still two years away from completing her degree, used this letter to remind herself that her current circumstances were a hurdle she would overcome: "its spring 2021 and you're finally halfway to completing your bachelor's degree. Although this

isn't the final finish line, it's something to celebrate but remember to stay focused on your goals."

Pablo encouraged himself to remember his strengths in the face of difficulty. In his letter to himself, he wrote:

Despite some setbacks and obstacles it is good to remind yourself of some of your greatest strengths and attributes. Your strength is your ability to stay organized, allowing your mind to concentrate on the tasks at hand and not be distracted.

Ash, who knew from past successes that he could thrive in academic spaces when he put the work and time into learning, reminded himself:

If you do your best, then you can conquer online learning and be successful because you do have that capability. You are smart. Your biggest strength is your writing skills and your organization skills. Utilize those and work to improve skills you have yet to master.

Then some participants used this assignment to highlight their strengths and remind themselves that they were continuing to grow. Charlie wrote: "I am kind, reluctant, patient, humorous, loving and above all I am strong. I will grow stronger. I am intelligent." Bertha, who frequently referenced a lack of a support system in her life, reminded herself that the work she was putting in now was already advancing her personal growth. Her letter was both self-compassionate and hopeful:

I want you to remember how strong and determined you are, to be more than your parents were for you. These days now will set forth the doors to the rest of your life, as a psychologist, sister, and friend. Year 28 is going to be a good year for you, I hope that you realize the butterfly that is becoming of you.

These early assignments naturally lent themselves toward positive self-talk, yet positive self-talk references appeared minimally compared to the more prevalent themes in the first five-week cluster. Moreover, students had free rein on how they responded to the reflection questions within the assignments. Most participants chose to highlight not one, but multiple positive qualities. Participants were kind to themselves and offered words of affirmation and encouragement. As the term progressed and the assignments turned away from values and strengths and into career exploration, I wondered if positive self-talk references would dwindle or persist. Like hope and optimism, positive self-talk endured and eclipsed other themes as the term progressed.

Midway through the course, as participants submitted artifacts, the positive self-talk continued. In the "I am" statements completed in week five, many made a point to articulate their positive qualities again without prompting. Some referenced their social intelligence, a trait we frequently talked about in class as critical to all future professions. Fiona referred to herself as "a very kindhearted, and understanding person." Bri wrote: "I am compassionate towards others." Jim shared: "I am good with people." Marigold celebrated: "I am a great active listener." While Khloe commented, "I am empathic, I understand people's feelings, so I give good advice."

After conducting his own research, C.C. also believed his strengths would allow him to successfully achieve his career goals: “Additionally, as a strong math student with good visualization skills, I was happy to hear that I could design things and have a chance at being a mechanical engineer.”

Fiona used her life design project to define her work view. As part of this definition, she made a point to celebrate her positive qualities as a means to achieving her goals: “I believe I am a confident, young lady and can do anything I want. I know that I am enough and will reach my goals I have always reached for.” She echoed this in her odyssey plan reflection two weeks later: “I believe I am a very determined hard worker, and can accomplish everything I dream to have in my life, and on this plan.”

In the course's final weeks, participants submitted final reflective artifacts through the personal charter and post-career assessment assignments. They were also meeting with me for final interviews. In class, the discussions focused on academic challenges and difficulties in their continued online learning. Overwhelmingly, participants were frustrated by a lack of breaks in the term. The University had decided just before the term's start to move the spring recess up from its original date in mid-March to the third week of the term. The change was abrupt, and faculty had little time to adjust their course schedules. This meant that the second week in February, when students were technically on spring break, most still had assignments and tests immediately following their break. As such, participants in the present study reported that they did not receive a true break, as most were still completing important assignments or preparing for an upcoming test during the designated recess. Participants were unsurprisingly exhausted by week eight of our course, a week or so after the original date of their spring break. These feelings of burnout were referenced often in class. However, despite these frustrations and challenges, the positive self-talk was alive and well in our conversations and their work.

In our final interview, Bertha talked about the pressure she experienced at work. She told me, “I’m always the dependable one.” As the individual her employers knew they could count on, Bertha was often tapped to work longer hours or fill in when others could not. She was justifiably proud of the recognition but frustrated that her hard work produced only additional work rather than additional compensation. She admitted that she could say no, but Bertha did not want to disappoint her employers. These additional hours put undue stress on Bertha. She elaborated that the extra hours did increase her paycheck, and financially, this was hard to turn down, as Bertha continuously worked toward having a better life. A week later, she submitted her post-career assessment reflection, where she elaborated on the artifacts in the course. In reference to her strengths-based resume and career genogram, she wrote: “This activity taught me that I am already doing better than my parents and to not put so much stress on myself.”

Participants shared in these final weeks what they had learned about themselves. Marigold wrote in her personal charter: “I am more prepared than I give myself credit for.” Baki realized he could produce high-quality work when he put in the effort. His early successes beget more success. In our final interview, he told me: “Once I actually sit down and focus,

when it comes to doing my work, I can put forth like really good work. I'm showing myself that I can do more now."

Jim continued to acknowledge his work ethic. In our final interview, he described how it translated from his job to school: "I feel like I'm resilient because I'm pretty dedicated to work and school. But I didn't really realize that cause most of the time I just focused on work." While C.C., who applied and accepted a new job while enrolled in the course, had seen firsthand how he could rise to any challenge when given more responsibility, "I feel like I have the responsibility to do work the right way. Even with my job at FedEx I notice that I'm a lot more efficient than even people who have been working there for months."

For Bri, the nature of our class assignments had allowed her to produce creative artifacts. She had learned how to use the online Canva tool in the course and had been inspired by the Canva presentation templates. Bri used these templates to generate ideas and created colorful PowerPoints, which she presented as her personal charter. In our final interview, she highlighted that this was a new skill she recognized: "I think visual communication, like making PowerPoints or something creative, that's a strength of mine."

The recognition of personal qualities in these final conversations and artifacts also reflected positive self-talk. Sofia referred to her increased confidence in taking risks. In her post-career assessment reflection, she wrote: "I am a brave person. I never used this word to characterize me but I like to take risks and even if someone tells me I can't achieve something I'm always there trying to prove someone wrong."

Khloe was pleased to recognize her own social intelligence. At several points in the semester, she described how this single skill set proved useful in many contexts. She elaborated in the final interview: "One thing that I never knew until our discussion in class was [my ability] to read the room and read people. I think that's really important with what I want to do. It's interesting to pay attention to it."

The theme of positive self-talk is powerful for students following perceived failure in the academic context (Milligan, 2007; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). As Ash put it in our final interview when describing the benefit of focusing on his positive qualities in the character strengths activity in our third class meeting: "It just made me feel good about myself at a time when I'm feeling really low about being on probation. It's nice to remember there are good qualities to you as well."

In the early weeks of the course, the theme of future uncertainty was the third most prevalent code. Participants frequently described their fears that stemmed from not having a clear path forward. In part, that uncertainty led many to choose the career exploration course as their program option. Many were questioning their goals and demonstrating self-doubt. Their artifacts in the course were full of reflection as they redefined their path. They were not merely redefining their goals. They were redefining their purpose.

### **Academic Outcomes**

At the end of the term, seven of the 11 participants on academic probation at the start of the term returned to good academic standing (64%). The four participants who began the

course in good academic standing remained in good standing. The other four participants who had started the term on academic probation had performed well enough in the term to be eligible to remain at the institution under the indicator of continued probation. This meant that while their cumulative GPA remained below a 2.0, they had successfully earned a minimum 2.3 term GPA and would be eligible to return and continue to improve their cumulative GPA. As such, all participants (100%) in the present study were eligible to return to the institution. This success rate is important given the high attrition risk for the population overall. Students on academic probation at the institution face academic suspension if their academic performance in the subsequent semester does not improve. Comparatively, in the target academic recovery population overall, 82% of those students who completed a more traditional academic success course while on or at-risk of academic probation were eligible to return to the institution. Of the 15 study participants, 14 enrolled at the University the following semester for a retention rate of 93%. By contrast, in the comparison group of academic recovery students who completed a traditional academic success course, 72% were retained. Moreover, study participants saw larger increases in their term GPAs compared to the target population of ARP students. The academic recovery target population who completed the program in the same term demonstrated an average 1.15 term GPA increase. By contrast, the 15 participants in this study who completed the career exploration course demonstrated an average +2.03 term GPA increase from the previous semester. It is worth noting that the participants who were selected to participate in the study were representative of the total ARP population, with gender and racial/ethnic distributions differing by no more than 5–7 percentage points across major groups.

### **Discussion & Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course on career self-efficacy and academic outcomes for students on academic probation, as well as to understand their experiences within it. The course activities asked participants to engage in reflection of values and positive qualities and to explore the intersection of those with their larger career goals. Overwhelmingly, students in the course reported an appreciation for the reflective experiences. Many reported that at no point in their academic career thus far had they had the opportunity to pause and reflect. To quote one participant: “It’s just a big rat race just to try to get through all the assignments and turn them over so you can get a good grade.”

The implications of this are astounding. The mission of higher education institutions is, in part, to equip students with the knowledge and skills to address society’s larger questions and engage productively as citizens. However, the mentality of the race to graduation may hinder opportunities for reflection. In theory, general education should provide this space. However, participants in the present study indicated that they felt there was no time in the institution’s timeline for exploration or reflection. They viewed the general education coursework and the courses in their chosen program of study as content to rehearse and then perform on final examinations or projects. One participant wrote about the “go-go-go” nature of college, reporting that he had learned concepts that he may or may not be able to recall later, but had not learned much about himself. Another reported that he believed

college was less about learning and more about endurance. He elaborated that his future employers would view his four-year college degree as less knowledge gained and more a demonstration of his ability to complete a goal.

All participants in the present study referenced the lack of opportunity to engage in self-reflection while in college. The fault of this challenge does not entirely fall on the shoulders of higher education, but educational leaders have the opportunity to support the reflection and growth of students. The limitations of the study may impede the ability to generalize findings across institutions of varying sizes or demographics. Yet, the lessons offer insights that are beneficial to any institution with a focus on student learning and growth. Career exploration experiences have positively influenced student self-concept (Lau et al., 2021), self-efficacy (DeWitz et al., 2009), and identity development (Astin et al., 2011). Career courses, particularly those grounded in exploring values and purpose, have successfully enhanced academic self-efficacy (Grier-Reid et al., 2009). This study confirmed these findings, with participants reporting increased career self-efficacy, sustained hope, and optimism throughout the academic term, as well as demonstrated increases in grade performance and retention. Leaders within higher education have the opportunity to positively influence student learning by designing and implementing career exploration resources beyond designated career centers or expanding career exploration resources across campus.

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