

Research Brief: Academic Probation and the Role of Notification Letters

The Challenge and Opportunity of Academic Probation

Every year, half of a million first-year college students are placed on academic probation in the US^{1,2}. At some schools, half of all students who enroll are placed on probation at least once³. Many of these students do not return to good academic standing expeditiously or—for some—ever^{4,5}. That hurts both students and schools. Yet there is little research on probation⁶.

To address this, the College Transition Collaborative **set out to understand:**

- o **students' experiences in the probation process**
- o **how insights from psychological science could promote better outcomes**

As part of our Student Academic Standing Success project, we have conducted more than

30 studies with **12,000** students and **400** administrators from **500** colleges and universities

"I felt like a failure and the vague impersonal language of the letter from some authority figure I had never met didn't help me at all."

"I felt like I was the only person who had ever become weak like this. I didn't tell anyone because I was ashamed."

Students' Experiences on Probation



In our research, students from a wide variety of different schools and backgrounds report that probation makes them **feel ashamed, embarrassed, and worried about whether they belong**^{7,8}. The word cloud on the left shows the most common emotion-related words students at one university used while describing their experiences on probation⁷. Most of the words are negative, and many are quite severe, like *devastated* and *terrifying*.

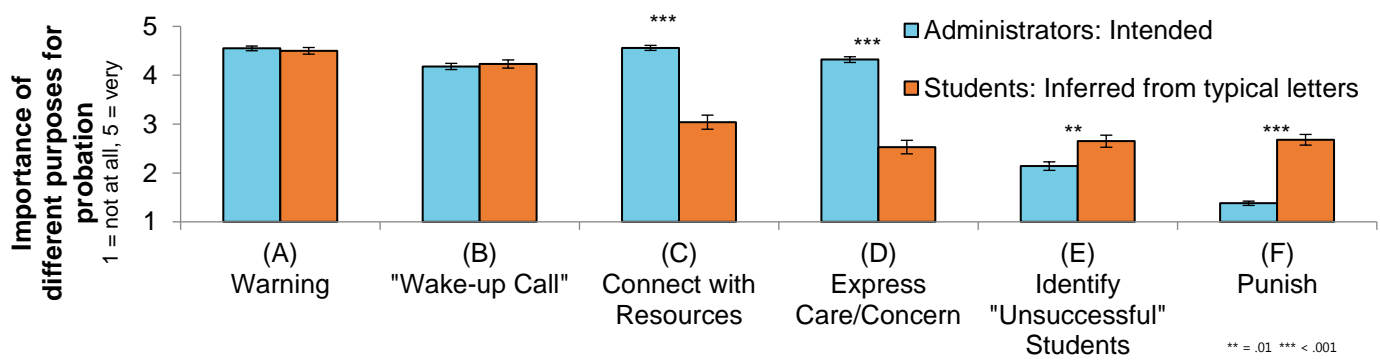
The "Miscommunication" of Typical Notification Letters

One thing that stood out in students' stories was how often they mentioned the letter they received officially informing them of their placement on probation. At some schools, **more than half of students talked about the letter**. Yet the message students took from the notification letters was not entirely what administrators intended.

In one study, **we asked administrators at 235 different schools their purposes for probation**. Next, undergraduates read these schools' probation letters. The students rated, based on the letters, how important they thought various purposes for probation were at each school⁹. The graph below depicts what we found.

In some ways, administrators' intentions and students' perceptions aligned: Administrators intended probation to (A) warn students and (B) serve as a wake-up call. Those purposes came across clearly in the notification letters. But in other cases, **the message intended was not the message received**. Administrators said they intended probation to (C) connect students with helpful resources and to (D) communicate to students that people at the school cared and were concerned. But students said that those purposes did not come across clearly and sincerely in the notification letters.

To make matters worse, while administrators said that (E) identifying students who can't be successful and (F) punishing students were not purposes for probation, students thought that maybe they were, based on the notification letters.



Typical Notification Letters Allow Worries and Shame, Lead to Withdrawal

Typical notification letters allow students to worry, “Am I viewed negatively by my school?” and “Does probation mean I don’t belong, or I can’t succeed?” This happens because most of these letters:

- Do not explicitly and fully communicate administrators’ positive intentions for probation
- Do not directly acknowledge the specific kinds of challenges that lead many students to struggle in college, challenges probation is designed to help students address
- Use language that inadvertently makes students feel marginalized, judged, or misunderstood

“Being on probation sucked. For some time after getting the letter, I felt that I didn’t belong. I had already felt that way coming in, but the letter seemed to confirm that... I wanted to drop out.”

For many students, these **worries impede academic recovery**. Feeling ashamed undermines motivation and can lead students to try to hide the fact they are on probation, which prevents them from seeking out the very campus resources that will get them back on track, like attending a tutoring session or speaking with an advisor or a professor.

“Psychologically Attuned” Letters Reduce Shame and Sustain Engagement

When you place students on probation, it is hard to communicate clearly in ways that tell students what probation is and why they are being placed on it without making them feel ashamed. That is why we have spent three years developing an approach to writing “**psychologically attuned**” notification letters. The goal is to provide clear, positive answers to the critical questions on students’ minds⁷.

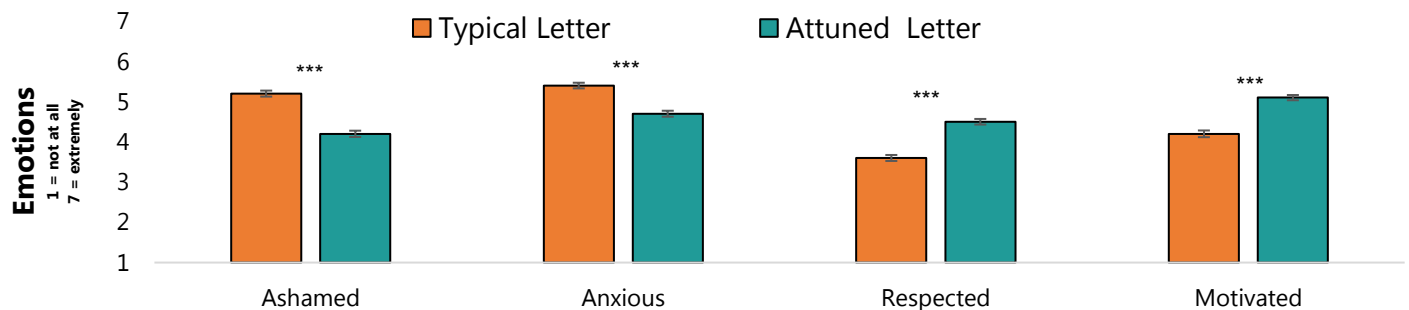
What is a psychologically attuned probation notification letter?

An attuned letter directly addresses the psychological worries on students’ minds, using four **Core Principles**:

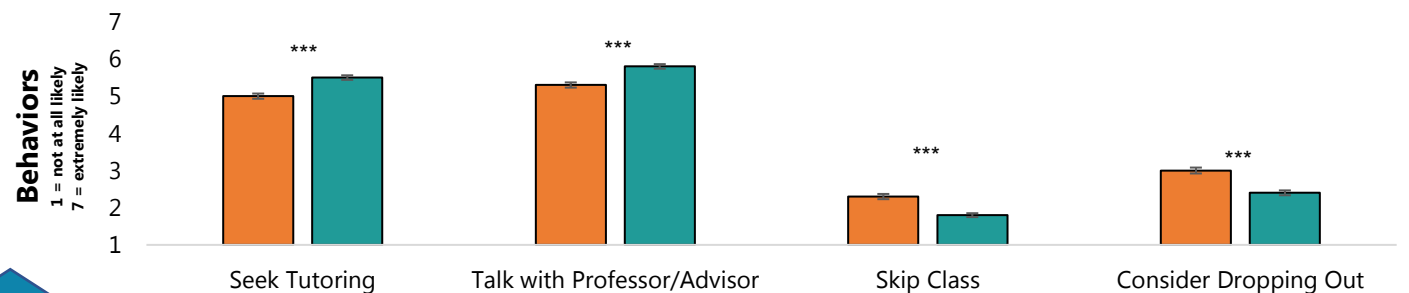
1. Frame probation as a process of learning and growth—not a label
2. Communicate that it is not uncommon to experience difficulties
3. Acknowledge a variety of specific reasons for academic difficulty
4. Offer hope of returning to good standing

It includes a few well-chosen stories from prior students who describe their own experience on probation in positive, growth-oriented ways.

Compared with typical probation notification letters, attuned letters decrease students’ feelings of shame and anxiety and increase students’ feelings of respect and motivation.⁸



Attuned letters increase students’ intentions to take advantage of resources and stay engaged.⁸



Academic Outcomes

An experiment at one university found that an attuned letter **increased students’ likelihood of reaching out to an academic advisor** soon after placement on probation ($z=1.85, p=0.06$) and **still being enrolled a year later** ($z=2.08, p=0.04$)⁷. Similar experiments are underway at six more US colleges.

The College Transition Collaborative

The College Transition Collaborative brings together pioneering social scientists, education researchers, and practitioners to create learning environments that produce more equitable higher education outcomes. We aim to help all students feel valued, respected, and like they can excel. probation@collegetransitioncollaborative.org

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