

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

### STUDENT SUCCESS

# More Colleges Are No Longer Putting Students on 'Academic Probation.' Here's Why.

By *Kate Hidalgo Bellows*

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KATHLEEN FU FOR THE CHRONICLE

One of the largest university systems in the country has dropped the term “academic probation” for students who are struggling in their classes — a label that some educators say can discourage students from getting help.

The University of California Academic Senate, which represents faculty members at the 10 UC campuses, [voted](#) last month to replace it with “academic notice.” Probation has connotations with the criminal-justice system, proponents of the change told *The Chronicle*, while [“notice”](#) is more neutral.

The new language is now codified in systemwide [regulations](#) and will be used starting in the fall.

“When students are labeled with probation, it impacts their mental health and their well-being, it decreases their confidence academically, it drives them away from university resources, it can actually decrease graduation rates,” said Raven Yoshitomi, director of student affairs in the School of Biological Sciences at UC-Irvine. “It’s just not effective in what we’re trying to accomplish.”

Yoshitomi is the outgoing vice chair and incoming chair of the UC Undergraduate Academic Advising Council, which sent a letter to the Academic Senate in February recommending the change.

In the last several years, other campuses have made similar language shifts in an effort to improve outcomes. Generally speaking, placement on academic probation or notice warns students that if they don't get their academics back on track, they could be kicked out.

Experts on higher ed and equity say that while dropping “probation” is a step in the right direction, there are other ways colleges can tweak their approach to working with students who are in academic trouble.

## A Growing Trend

California State University at Fullerton started using “academic notice” in the fall of 2021. In a nine-page [white paper](#), two then-administrators and a student made the case for updating the language.

“It is crucial that we lead our campus, the CSU and perhaps the nation in abandoning an outdated, deficit-based, and in some ways offensive criminal justice connotation to the twists in the pathways that a disproportionately high number of students of color take, in pursuit of their higher education goals,” the authors wrote.

Delilah La Pietra, the student author, had conducted an independent study of student perceptions of academic probation in the spring of 2020 after she was placed on it during her freshman year. Her findings were wrapped into the white paper: Ninety-three percent of respondents — all of them students on academic probation — said they were scared of the term, and students who were Pell-eligible, Black, Latino/a, or male were overrepresented among those on academic probation.

Elizabeth Boretz, a co-author and formerly assistant vice president for student success and director of the academic advisement center at Cal State-Fullerton, said she saw the shift as an opportunity to target achievement gaps for

students of color and male students. “I just thought, our mission is to encourage them and retain them and help them see that they still have their potential,” Boretz said. “We’re here to help them persist and move on — that label of probation isn’t helping them.”

Statistics that Boretz shared with *The Chronicle* from Moorpark College, which implemented a similar language change in 2023, suggested small but significant improvements in persistence between 2022, when students received an “academic probation” letter, and 2023, when they received an “academic notice” letter.

About 69 percent of students who received the “probation” letter came back the next semester, compared to almost 74 percent of those who received the “notice” letter. Among Latino/a students, rates of persistence climbed nearly 9 percentage points.

Twelve other CSU campuses now use “academic notice.” Outside of California, the College of Wooster, in Ohio, scrapped “probation” for “notice” in 2022, and Purdue University did the same last year.

Before the last five years, academic probation “was the common term used across the board,” said Kyle Ross, executive director of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, a national membership group. “Now we’re starting to see that pendulum shift a bit.”

In a [memo](#) urging the renaming of academic probation, the educational policy committee of Purdue’s University Senate cited [research](#) suggesting that placement on probation harms the four-year graduation rate.

That study found that while the effects of probation on graduation were sometimes larger among female students and students with better high-school GPAs, they cut across demographics and levels of achievement in high school.

Probation-related shame and stigma “interfere with the perception that students can succeed or belong in college, which may reduce on-time graduation,” the Purdue committee wrote.

## A Shift From a Focus on Wrongdoing

Shannon Brady, an assistant professor of psychology at Wake Forest University, has [researched](#) how academic-probation letters are received by students and supports the renaming efforts. In fact, she believes a different label could even help change how academic advisers feel about students, if the new status is less suggestive of delinquency.

But Brady emphasized that such a quick fix was unlikely to make that much of a difference on its own, and should be accompanied by updates to the framing of the notice letters.

For example, Brady said a notice letter should provide hope of returning to good academic standing. Of the more than 100 she’s read so far, almost every one says that it’s possible to get back in the college’s good graces. But very few say that it’s ever been done.

“Simply assuring students that it is actually possible to do this thing is really helpful in both tamping down the stigma and encouraging people’s positive behaviors,” Brady said, “because it suggests that there could be a payoff for that.”

Another element of what Brady calls a “psychologically attuned” notice letter is acknowledging the wide spectrum of reasons that a student can wind up on academic warning. Students told researchers that they were worried the institution saw them as lazy or unintelligent, when in reality, life had gotten in the way of their academic success.

“Directly acknowledging that, in our experience, has gone a long way in tamping down those worries that students have about being seen as lazy or stupid,” she said. “Because you help people appreciate that we understand there’s a lot of things that could have happened.”

Some critics — including students themselves — oppose changing the language because they feel that “probation” accurately reflects the severity of a substandard academic record. Boretz, formerly of Cal State-Fullerton, said some students told her they wanted the university to light a fire under them if they were doing poorly.

Ross, of the academic-adviser group, said he’s heard these arguments, but in his view, students who aren’t succeeding know as much and don’t need the additional indignity.

“It’s a tricky balance,” Ross said. “You need to convey the seriousness of the situation, help a student get back on track, but you want to do so through avoiding deficit-based language and not further exacerbating their feelings of shame.”

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*Correction (July 23, 2024, 9:55 p.m.): Statistics shared with The Chronicle suggesting improvements in persistence with an "academic notice" letter were from **Moorpark** College and not CSU-Fullerton. The error has been corrected.*

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