

Uncovering Assets of Readmitted College Students through Learning Contracts: An Application of Appreciative Advising

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Frequently, higher education institutions have policies in place to suspend or dismiss students who do not meet academic standards, along with procedures for these students to petition to return. Re-enrolling those who are suspended or dismissed is beneficial to both the institution and the students. The cost to re-enroll a former student is much less than the cost to recruit a new student (Black, 2001). In addition, former students already have an established relationship with the college or university, are more familiar with the programs, and are likely to have already fulfilled some requirements, which all support their academic efforts toward successful graduation.

Despite these benefits, limited research exists on how to best facilitate previously suspended and dismissed students once they have been readmitted (Hall & Gahn, 1994; Hutson & He 2011; McDermott, 2008; Meadows & Tharp, 1996). According to Hall and Gahn (1994), research on suspended and readmitted students was inconclusive, often citing conflicting results when predicting outcomes after readmission. More recently, researchers recognized the importance of examining the details of students' experiences once they are readmitted, and the environmental and support factors that predict their academic success. Based on personal accounts from students who were reinstated, Robeson (1998) found common characteristics among the students' personal accounts, including a desire to learn, searching for identity, experiencing emotional upheavals, changing perceptions of professors, and a strong family influence on motivation and decision making. Similarly, McDermott (2008) examined readmitted college students and found that 20% of them were eligible to return for two semesters and achieve good academic standing. These successful students had a higher GPA at the time of suspension, declared a major prior to suspension, were engaged in an intervention program, and participated in the appeal process.

These studies illustrated the importance of highlighting the assets and strengths readmitted students bring with them as they re-launch their academic journey in programs designed to facilitate their transition. This study describes an intervention program using learning contracts that incorporate the Appreciative Advising model (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) to support students reinstated to the university; the impact of the program on students' academic performance and their self-identified strengths; and components of the program that were perceived as beneficial by students are also highlighted.

Literature Review

The use of learning contracts is an alternative way of structuring a learning experience. Instead of specifying how a body of content will be transmitted (i.e., a content plan), a learning contract details how a body of content will be acquired by the learner (i.e., a process plan)

(Knowles, 1986). It is a self-directed process of learning, through which learners reflect on their commitment to both the process and the outcome and, as a result, increase ownership of the learning experiences. As Knowles (1986) found, when “adults learn on their own initiative they learn more deeply and permanently than what they learn by being taught” (p.265). While learning contracts have long been used in adult education, they are often associated with students who are identified as more self-directed and have circumstances that permit them to learn specific content or skills independently. Being adapted for college students seeking to improve their academic standing, learning contracts are often described as “academic contracts” or “success contracts” where instructors/advisors and students co-construct an agreement on the learning process based on both learners’ academic goals and their personal characteristics (Clark & Hutson, 2007). In this study, we used “Student Success Contract Program” to describe the learning contract program at our institution.

While the objectives of the contract often include meeting requirements for institutional good standing, and portions of the contract are prescribed by the contract facilitator (instructor or advisor), the fundamental components of the contract remain the same. Learning contract provides a supplemental learning experience that supports more traditional classroom-based academic activities and engages students in more self-directed learning processes.

In order to maximize students’ individual strengths and assets in applying learning contract process in the Student Success Contract Program, we adopted Appreciative Advising as the framework in individual interactions with readmitted students. Different from traditional college academic advising models, Appreciative Advising not only focuses on advising outcomes, but also considers the advising process itself with the development of both the advisor and the student. Appreciative Advising is a social constructivist philosophy providing a framework for academic advisors to optimize their interactions with students in both individual and group settings. The framework involves a six phase model through which, embracing the appreciative mindset, advisors intentionally use positive, active, and attentive listening and questioning strategies to build trust and rapport with students (Disarm); uncover students’ strengths and skills (Discover); encourage and be inspired by students’ dreams (Dream); co-construct action plans with students to make their goals a reality (Design); support students as they carry out their plans (Deliver); and challenge both themselves and their students to continually increase performance (Don’t Settle) (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The goals of Appreciative Advising are to 1) nurture meaningful partnerships between advisors and students, 2) generate co-constructed paths to success, and 3) provide individualized sets of tools and timelines for personal development (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). In the Student Success Contract Program, we applied the framework in building relationships with the readmitted students (Disarm), highlighting students’ strengths when discussing the learning process (Discover), engaged students in self-directed goal setting (Dream), and co-designed the Student Success Contract with the students (Design). Once the contract was agreed upon, we also followed up with the students as they fulfilled the learning process specified in the contact (Deliver), and monitored their growth to continue to challenge them to reach higher expectations (Don’t Settle).

Typically, the use of contracts with students who are in academic recovery is evaluated only through reviewing academic outcomes, such as grade point averages (GPAs) and retention rates. In this study, to further understand the Student Success Contract Program, a learning contract program integrating the Appreciative Advising framework, we not only examined how

it impacts students' academic performance, but also explored students' self-perceived strengths as a result of participating in the program.

Program Context

The Student Success Contract program was introduced at a large public university in the southeastern United States to support students who reenrolled after experiencing academic suspension or dismissal. At this institution, students who are academically suspended are required to sit out for an academic year before they are permitted to reenroll. Upon returning, if they do not attain a term GPA of 2.3 out of 4.0 at the end of their first semester, they are "academic dismissed." Students who are academic dismissed are not permitted to reenroll without engaging in an appeals process managed through the institution's Undergraduate Studies division.

Students returning from suspension or dismissal are required by University policy to participate in the Student Success Contract program, the aim of which is to assist students in 1) identifying their strengths, 2) discovering their purpose, and 3) aligning these assets with plans for their future. The program requirements include monthly meetings with a professional advisor, one-on-one meetings with each of their class instructors, a one-on-one consultation with a support office representative, participation in a strengths-based self-discovery workshop, and an earned 2.3 term GPA at the conclusion of the semester. Each monthly meeting with the advisor has a clear agenda based on the student's academic needs. The six phases of the Appreciative Advising process are adapted in the program for interactions between advisors and students. Prior to the first day of class, students must meet with their advisor and review the components of the Student Success Contract, as well as their class schedule. At the advisor's discretion, this preliminary conversation may also include a discussion of applicable academic policies for students to consider as part of their academic plan, such as grade forgiveness or grade appeal procedures. The remaining meetings provide students an opportunity to regularly check in with their advisor and address any concerns that have developed over the duration of the term. Advisors also use these monthly meetings to ensure that students are fulfilling their responsibilities and meeting their GPA requirements.

While some aspects of the Student Success Contracts may seem to be prescribed, much of the contract stipulations are negotiated and designed by the student in consultation with their assigned advisor. Students identify academic and development goals, and work with the advisors to develop strategies and secure resources to pursue them.

Pilot Study Findings

In a fall 2006 pilot, returning dismissed students were asked to voluntarily sign a contract in which they committed to several face-to-face sessions that used the Appreciative Advising framework. During these conversations, students identified personal strengths and interests, developed a personal academic recovery plan, and found sources of academic and personal support. Out of 18 formerly academically dismissed students who were readmitted, 12 participated in the program. At the end of the fall 2006 semester, 92% of the participants were eligible to continue in the following semester, and 58% earned term GPAs of over 3.00. The mean GPA among participants was 2.86, which was significantly higher than the 2.3 term GPA

required by the university to remain eligible for enrollment. Conversely, among students who did not participate, 33% percent were eligible to continue, and the mean GPA was 1.29. Because of the findings of the pilot study, the University adopted a policy requiring students who have been readmitted after academic dismissal and academic suspension to participate in the Student Success Contract Program that utilized these Appreciative Advising sessions.

Table 1. Performance of Spring 2007 through Fall 2008 Cohorts Returning from Suspension

	GPA				Academic Standing				
	<u>Term</u>	<u>Cumulative</u>	<u>Good Standing</u>		<u>Continuing Probation</u>		<u>Dismissal</u>		<u>Total</u>
2007 Spring	1.60	1.80	18	17.8%	38	37.6%	45	44.6%	101
2007 Fall*	2.05	1.77	21	27.6%	31	40.8%	24	31.6%	76
2008 Spring	2.40	1.87	33	31.1%	35	33.0%	38	35.8%	106
2008 Fall	2.49	1.86	38	39.2%	34	35.1%	25	25.8%	97

* First cohort in program

As illustrated in Table 1, since the Student Success Contract Program was implemented, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of students either returning to good standing or continuing on probation. The number of student dismissals has also decreased. Additionally, there was an increase in students' term GPA, further illustrating the positive short-term impact of the program.

Table 2. Performance of Spring 2006 through Fall 2008 Cohorts Returning from Dismissal

	GPA				Academic Standing				
	<u>Term</u>	<u>Cumulative</u>	<u>Good Standing</u>		<u>Continuing Probation</u>		<u>Dismissal</u>		<u>Total</u>
2006 Fall*	2.86	1.86	6	50%	5	41.66%	1	8.33%	12
2007 Fall**	2.26	2.02	6	46.15%	5	38.46%	2	15.38%	13
2008 Spring	2.50	1.96	3	50.00%	0	0.00%	3	50.00%	6
2008 Fall	2.72	1.97	4	16.67%	18	75.00%	2	8.33%	24

* First cohort in program (pilot cohort)
** First cohort of entire population

The same trend holds for students returning from academic dismissal. As shown in Table 2, over three years the percentage of students who were able to continue through reaching good standing or continuing on probation equaled 92% (Fall 2006), 85% (Fall 2007), and 50% (Spring 2008) respectively. Comparing the term and cumulative GPA indicates a general enhancement in participants' academic performance.

While these trends indicated that the program is effective in helping students transition back into college and recover their academic standing, it was not clear what strengths and assets

supported students' academic growth. In addition, we were also interested in learning more about what specific elements of the program have the greatest impact on student success.

Methodology

The purposes of this study were to 1) examine the impact of the Student Success Contract Program on student academic achievement; 2) explore students' self-identified assets through the program; and 3) identify components of the program that are most beneficial for students.

Participants

At the time of this study, there were 13,453 undergraduates at the University, 11,868 were enrolled full-time and 31% lived in residence halls. Over 67% of undergraduate students were female and 22% of undergraduates were African-American. Participants in this study included every one of the 145 students who returned from academic suspension or dismissal in the Fall 2008 semester. In this group there were 43 male (30%) and 102 female (70%) students, which was similar to the general student population at University. The participants included three Asian/Asian Americans (2%), 62 African Americans (43%), three Hispanic/Latino (2%), 69 White (48%), and eight whose ethnicity was not disclosed (6%). There were no international students among the participants. The average age of the participants was 26, and ages ranged from 18 to 59. Among the participants, 84 (58%) were over 23 years of age and 104 (72%) were returning from academic suspension. The academic suspension policy prohibits students from enrolling at the university for at least one term. Finally, another 41 participants (28%) were returning from dismissal, meaning they were ineligible to enroll for at least one full academic year. Although participation in the program was mandatory for returning students, participation in the study was voluntary.

Data Collection and Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected for this study. Quantitative data were collected using the *Appreciative Advising Academic Preview/Postview* instrument, the *Success Contract Program Evaluation* instrument, student retention rates, and student GPAs. Qualitative data included written feedback by student participants provided on the *Success Contract Program Evaluation* instrument.

The *Appreciative Advising Academic Preview/Postview* instrument was adapted from the *Appreciative Advising Inventory* (AAI) (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The original AAI was designed to accompany the Appreciative Advising framework and was modeled after the 40 Developmental Assets instrument developed by The Search Institute (www.search-institute.org). Similar to the 40 Developmental Assets instrument, the AAI helps individuals to identify both external assets (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time) and internal assets (commitment to learning, values, social competencies, and positive identities). The AAI instrument is a 5-point Likert scale survey (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree) containing 44 items addressing two main subscales: internal assets (items 1-22), and external assets (items 23-44). The reliability of the instrument was .95, and LISREL analysis confirmed the constructs of the instrument (RMR = .08; GFI = .95) (He, Hutson, & Bloom, 2010). In order to target the instrument for the Student Success Contract Program, we selected 16 items from the original instrument with eight items focusing on internal assets and eight on external assets that are specifically connected with students' self-directed

learning process and their academic pursuit. The reliability of the instrument is .87. Factor analysis confirmed the two subscales included in the instrument. In this study, the *Appreciative Advising Academic Preview/Postview* instrument was used as a self-assessment tool for students to identify their own assets and strengths before and after the program.

The *Success Contract Program Evaluation* instrument, distributed at the conclusion of the Student Success Contract Program, is a measure of program effectiveness including both Likert-scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree) and open-ended questions. The nine Likert-scale items focus on the overall goals of the program (items 1-3), program aspects (items 4-6), and advisor connections (items 7- 9). The three open-ended questions asked participants to identify the most beneficial program components, least beneficial program components, and suggestions participants had for program improvements. The reliability of the instrument was .88.

GPA's and retention rates were collected as part of the program data. The percentage of participants eligible to continue enrollment, and the percentage of those who achieved good standing, are reported. A paired-sample t-test was conducted to examine participants' GPA growth. Descriptive statistics are reported for both the *Appreciative Advising Academic Preview/Postview* instrument and the *Success Contract Program Evaluation* instrument. Qualitative data were analyzed to identify themes and patterns participants reported in terms of beneficial program components.

Findings

The findings were organized to highlight the impact of the program on student academic achievement, their self-identified strengths through the program, and components of the program that were recognized as most beneficial to support students' academic success.

Academic Achievement

Participants in this study demonstrated significant academic achievement over the course of the semester. Among all the participants, 92% met the criteria to continue enrollment, with 62% achieving good standing. A mean cumulative GPA gain of .05 at the end of the Fall 2008 semester was noted among all participants (see Table 3). Paired-sample t-test indicated a statistically significant growth of participants' GPA over the course of the semester when they were participating in the Student Success Contract Program ($\alpha < .00$).

Table 3. Participant GPA Growth

<u>Pre-GPA</u>		<u>Post-GPA</u>		<u>T</u>	<u>Sig</u>
<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>		
1.63	.52	2.19	1.04	7.64	.000

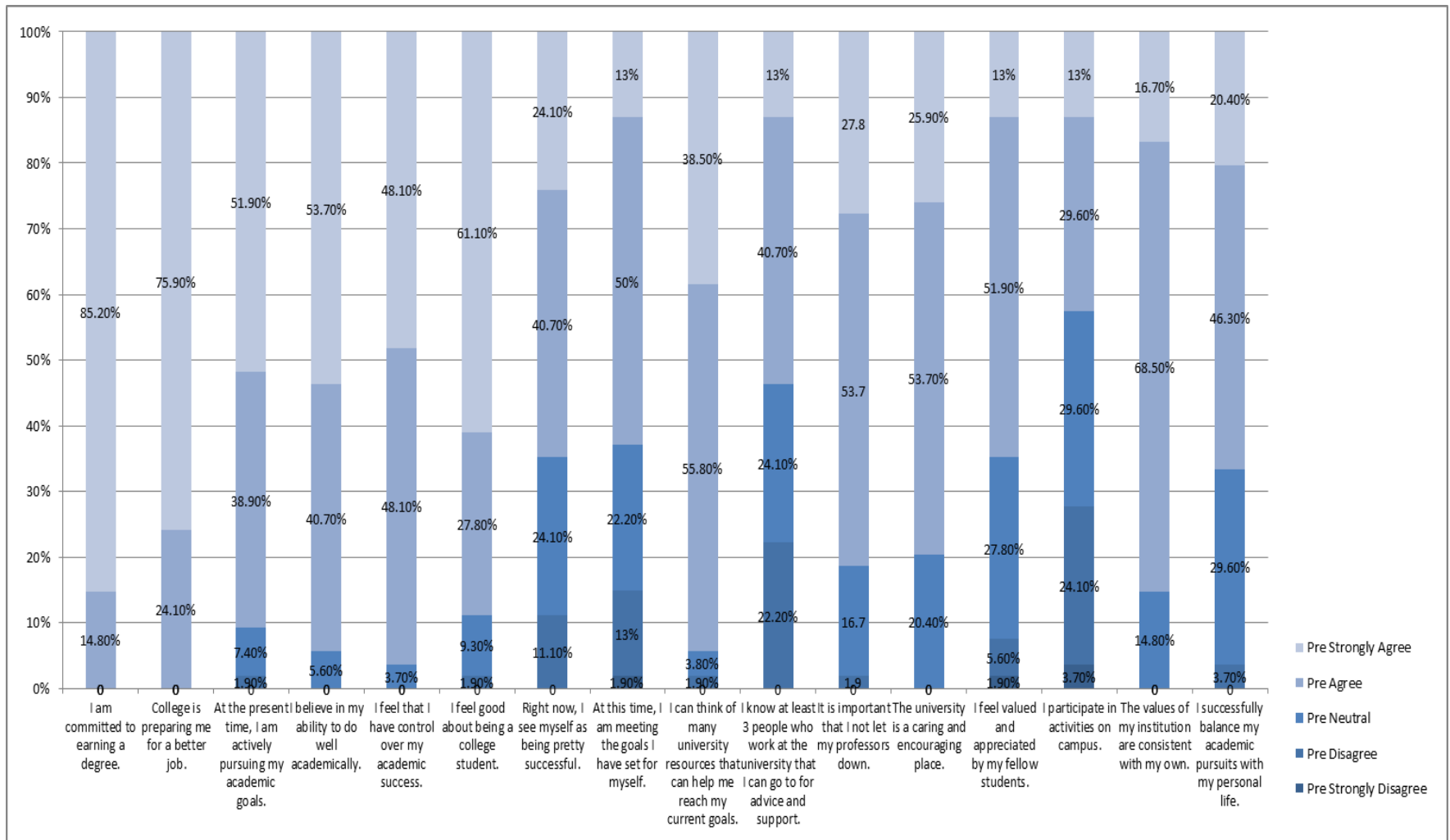


Figure 1. Appreciative Advising Academic Preview

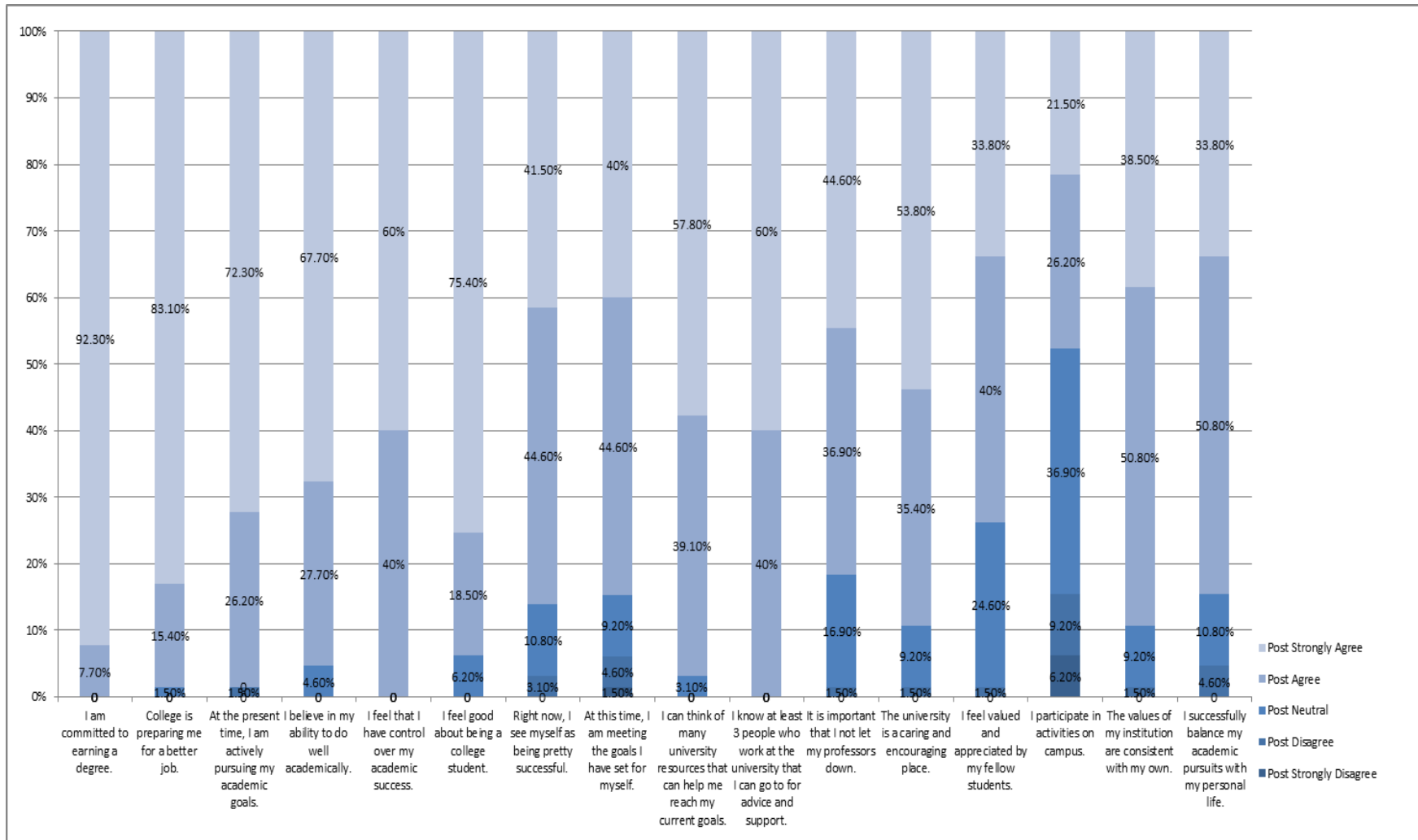


Figure 2. Appreciative Advising Academic Postview

Development of Self-Identified Strengths and Assets

Participants reported higher levels of internal assets based on the *Appreciative Advising Academic Preview* instrument (see Figure 1). All participants agreed or strongly agreed that they are committed to earning a degree (item 1) and that college prepares them for a better job (item 2). Two thirds of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they see themselves as being successful college students (item 7) or meeting their own goals (item 8), which means that at least one third of the participants do not see these as their internal assets at the beginning of the semester. In terms of external assets, almost all participants (94%) agreed or strongly agreed that they can think of university resources that can help them achieve their goals (item 9). Over half of the participants reported that they do not participate in activities on campus (item 14) and over 40% disagreed that they know at least three people on campus that they can go to for advice and support (item 10).

Based on the *Appreciative Advising Academic Postview* instrument, a larger percentage of the participants reported positively regarding both internal and external assets (see Figure 2). It was worth noting that almost all participants (>90%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were committed to earning a degree (item 1), college prepares them for a better job (item 2), they are actively pursuing their academic goals (item 3), they believe in their ability to do well academically (item 4), they feel they have control over their academic successes (item 5), and they feel good about being a college student (item 6). Over 85% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they see themselves as being pretty successful (item 7) and meeting their own goals (item 8), which indicated a growth in the percentage compared to the preview instrument. In terms of external assets, more participants identified these assets (items 9-16) in the postview compared to their responses to the preview instrument. The most significant growth as noted in item 10, where 100% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they know at least three people on campus they can go to for advice and support as opposed to the 60% reported in the preview instrument. A larger percentage of participants (88%) agreed and strongly agreed that they can successfully balance their academic pursuits with their personal life (item 16) compared to 67% in the preview instrument. Participating in campus activities was consistently the asset with which the least number of participants identified.

Program Components and Recommendations

Based on the Success Contract Program Evaluation Instrument (see Table 5), over 90% of the participants rated Agree or Strongly Agree on every aspect of the program. In terms of connection with advisors, almost all participants agreed or strongly agreed that their primary advisor is someone who cares about them and their academic success (item 3), with 86% of the participants strongly agreeing with the statement. Overall, 82% strongly agreed that the program has been helpful. In terms of program components, over 95% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that meeting monthly with the advisor (item 7) and meeting one-on-one with instructors (item 8) were helpful.

Table 5. Program Evaluation Results

	Percentage				
	<u>SD</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>SA</u>
Advisor Connection					
1. I feel like I connected with my primary advisor.	2.3	0.0	6.8	22.7	68.2
2. I would come back to see my primary advisor in the future.	2.3	0.0	2.3	18.2	77.3
3. My primary advisor (the person I met with multiple times) is someone who cares about me and my academic success.	0.0	0.0	2.3	11.4	86.4
Overall Goals					
4. Overall, the Success Contract program has been helpful to me in my first semester back.	0.0	2.3	4.5	11.4	81.8
5. The Success Contract program has helped me better understand Academic Policies.	0.0	2.3	2.3	25.0	70.5
6. The Success Contract program has made me more aware of campus resources available to assist me.	0.0	2.3	2.3	29.5	65.9
Program Aspects					
7. Meeting monthly with my advisor, which was required as part of my Success Contract, has been helpful to me.	0.0	2.3	2.3	18.2	77.3
8. The 1-on-1 meetings with my instructors, which were required as part of my Success Contract, were helpful to me.	0.0	0.0	4.5	34.1	61.4
9. Visiting one support office, which was required as part of my Success Contract, was helpful to me.	0.0	0.0	6.8	27.3	65.9

In the written feedback, participants further confirmed the importance of meeting with advisors and instructors and commented on receiving feedback and having their questions answered during these meetings. One participant, for example, stated “Having instructor feedback, because it helped me plan out what I needed to do better or keep doing to maintain in good standing. Also, monthly one-on-one meets were of great help because all my questions could be answered.” Many participants also commented on the personal relationship they developed with their advisors through these monthly meetings and how they felt being encouraged and supported in their discussions. As one participant commented, “The monthly meetings were AWESOME. She [the advisor] was so helpful and really showed me that she

actually cared. Having someone to talk about school and the ins and outs of college is great! Especially when they're attentive and trying to help.” In addition to meetings with instructors and advisors, several participants also highlighted the workshop they attended and specifically mentioned that the Discovery workshop was helpful because “it taught me how to focus on my strengths and not weaknesses” and “I get to see I wasn't alone in the same situations”.

Most participants reported that they could not think of anything that was not beneficial in the program, but some did mention that they found the Discovery workshop to be less helpful than the personal communications they had with advisors and instructors. Some participants recommended requiring more meetings with advisors and instructors and others also mentioned that they would be interested in having more choices of different types of workshops.

Overall, many participants described gaining an improved sense of purpose from the program, with several indicating that they had changed majors based on their improved self-understanding, and a majority describing improved relationships with instructors. More than half of the students described having developed short-term academic plans that they felt were more aligned with their strengths.

Discussions and Implications

The findings in this study not only illustrated the positive impact of the Student Success Contract Program on readmitted students' academic achievements, but also highlighted the assets these students bring with them as they return to the college setting, the assets they develop through the program, and the types of support they need as they transition in their academic journey. Based on these findings and our experiences managing this program, we would like to offer the following suggestions for those who might be interested in implementing similar programs at their own institutions.

First, it was important for instructors, advisors and the students to assess and recognize the strengths and assets they bring into their academic learning process. While the contract process allowed the students to develop ownership and set their own goals for learning, the instrument served as a self-assessment to give students an opportunity to reflect on their strengths. Having students complete such an instrument at the beginning of the program allowed both the advisors and the students to focus their initial discussions on assets rather than deficits, which could then lead to more constructive discussions about how students could leverage their assets in recovering academically. This strength-based, instead of problem-focused, discussion empowers the students to take on more responsibilities in learning and allows the advisors to build rapport with the students from the very beginning.

Second, encouraging students to set meetings with instructors could facilitate their own monitoring of academic progress and in the long run, support their academic achievements. The one-on-one meeting with the instructors was a required component of the Student Success Contract Program. Prior to this requirement, many students have not had the chance to set individual appointments with their instructors. Encouraging students to initiate these types of individual interactions helps the students to become more independent and resourceful. The increasing number of participants indicating that they knew more than three people on campus to go to for advice and support as a result of the program was a clear indication that advisors need to intentionally encourage students in initiating such interactions.

Third, the advisors' monthly meeting with the students is a critical component of the Student Success Contract Program. In these meetings, students had opportunities to ask questions and shared concerns. At the same time, advisors continued to offer support, encouragement, guidance, and challenges. Applying the Appreciative Advising framework, while the initial meetings may involve Disarm, Discover, Dream and Design, through which a learning contract could be co-constructed, the later monthly meetings involve Deliver and Don't Settle, which are equally important, if not more important, in sustaining students' motivation and ownership of the learning process.

Finally, academic advisors often serve as advocates for students, but face challenges in this role because they feel they cannot impact institutional policies. In this study, we demonstrated that by implementing a pilot and collecting data to measure impact, professional advisors petitioned the University to modify a long-standing policy and establish a retention initiative aimed at students experiencing academic difficulty. Through continued systematic data collection and analysis, we would be able to make more data-drive decisions regarding advising policy and advising programming.

Conclusion

In order to enhance college student academic achievement, it is important that returning students are adequately supported. This study expanded the discussion on how students who have experienced poor academic performance transition back into college, and explored the support and services we could provide to facilitate and maximize students' academic successes. The integration of the Appreciative Advising framework in a learning contract program offered a model for those who are interested in applying strength-based theoretical framework into their daily advising practices and advising programs.

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