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A Positive Change for a Negative Label

California State University, Fullerton, sought to make students feel less defeated about being placed on academic probation, so administrators banished “probation” from the institution’s official lexicon.

By David Steele



Cal State Fullerton’s switch to more inclusive language about students’ academic status is part of a trend in higher ed as college administrators rethink how to best serve underperforming students.

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Students at California State University, Fullerton, who fall below a 2.0 grade point average this semester will no longer be put on academic probation. They will instead be placed on “academic notice,” thanks to an official shift in language at the university.

While being on academic notice still means the same thing institutionally as being on academic probation, university officials say the new term has gone a long way toward making students, especially students of color, feel less stigmatized.

For many of the Latino and Black students among the 41,000-student body, the word “probation” had a negative connotation and fed into a stereotype of criminality, and it was also tied too strongly to law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Cal State Fullerton is federally designated as a Hispanic-serving institution, thanks to its nearly 43 percent Latino enrollment, and administrators had been looking for ways to prioritize equity and inclusion in the institution’s culture, including in the language used in reference to student performance and academic outcomes.

The decision to rename academic probation occurred in that context in the spring of 2020, when Elizabeth Boretz, the university’s assistant vice president and director of the academic advisement center, and Delilah La Pietra, a student now in her junior year, found themselves examining the use of “probation.” Boretz was restructuring the office that works with students to get back in good academic standing, to make their efforts seem less punitive and more supportive. La Pietra was grappling with having been put on probation after a subpar first semester.



Delilah La Pietra (left) and Elizabeth Boretz

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"I was extremely terrified," said La Pietra, a psychology major. She felt probation implied she was in deep, irreversible trouble and was being punished for falling behind academically.

She turned her fear into an independent study project for a psychology course and surveyed 100 fellow students on their feelings about the word "probation." The survey answers revealed that while being on probation "really isn't that bad," the label of "probation" made the experience emotionally negative. For many students, especially Latinx and Black students, she said, "It was traumatizing."

"That was my experience with it," La Pietra said. "As a white woman and as a psych major, I recognize that my experience is going to be different. I'm privileged, and in this case, I could use that privilege to understand and change the experience for other people."

Boretz was meanwhile engaged in talks among faculty, staff and administrators at the university about making cultural change in the wake of both the pandemic and the national social and racial reckoning after George Floyd's murder. The idea of changing the term "probation" was floated during those discussions: "The criminality of it—you shouldn't feel like you're afraid, like you're in trouble," Boretz explained.

Student presentations followed about changes they wanted to see in the university system. La Pietra and her survey of students' feelings about "probation" was among the presentations. Boretz, who was at the presentations, realized she and La Pietra were thinking, and working, along the same lines. From then on the two linked their parallel paths.

"We were destined to connect," Boretz said. "For decades, I was invested in student success. I know how uncomfortable I was at hearing that word."

Boretz and then associate vice president Karyn Scissum Gunn—now provost at California State University, Long Beach—put together a nine-page white paper specifically aimed at changing the term. It incorporated La Pietra's study, including graphs that showed that four student demographics fell into the "probation" category disproportionate to their percentage on campus: Latinos, Blacks, males and those receiving federal financial aid (Pell Grants).

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The report stated, “Ms. La Pietra implicitly raises an important and timely question: Could we align the language that we use around Academic Probation with the positive, empowering support that our CSUF staff provide?”

Cal State Fullerton, which has the largest enrollment of the California State University system’s 23 campuses, adopted the new language, and “academic notice” became official universitywide. Boretz said other campuses in the system are considering adopting it as well.

La Pietra and fellow students were thrilled about the change. She recalled speaking at length with one student who was deeply affected by it.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “They felt like they were being stopped in their tracks and being redirected. They didn’t feel like they were in trouble. It didn’t make them feel bad.”

Discussions about changing language as part of redefining an institution’s educational goals for their students are occurring more frequently, said Ivory Toldson, a professor of counseling psychology at Howard University and author of *Campus Uprisings: How Student Activists and Collegiate Leaders Resist Racism and Create Hope* (Teachers College Press, 2020).

“It does feel like a larger moment to try to make universities or the higher education industry more inclusive and a less competitive environment,” he said.

Toldson is seeing evidence that colleges no longer want to view tough standards that drive out lesser students “as a badge of honor. They look at [them] as a problem that needs correcting, to reduce the punitive environment in college, to make it more inclusive.”

While changing language is not the same as changing those standards, Toldson said words such as “probation” are problematic “for some communities more than others ... Certain communities are more sensitive to the trappings of the criminal justice system. It raises questions about the school-to-prison pipeline, something we don’t talk about as much in higher education, but we still have the terminology of the criminal justice system. Look at how often we use ‘lockdown’ now.”

The entrenched terminology that made “probation” the standard reflects a widespread inability for institutions to remember who their audience is, said Teresa Valerio Parrot, principal at TVP Communications, a public relations company that works with college presidents and other higher ed leaders.

“There’s a disconnect between the two, between what the institutions say and how they communicate and what the students hear ... These policies and processes are put in place, and once they are, they are then lived by people,” she said.

She noted that college administrators often don’t realize they’re using terms like “probation” and “investigation” instead of the more accurate “review” and other terms that have connotations of helping students.

“We have to move away from their jargon, recognize how much they think in terms of their jargon, in acronyms, in language that’s useful only to them,” she said.

Nick Bowman, the Mary Louise Petersen Chair in Higher Education at the University of Iowa, has heard of “probation” being eliminated at some colleges in favor of “warning” or “alert,” and of those terms being added to terminology that still includes “probation.” Those conversations are starting to take place at institutions that are trying to become more inclusive and remove barriers to graduation.

“They’re doing exactly what you want them to do,” Bowman said of the change at Cal State Fullerton. “I’m hearing talk of changing to ‘warning,’ and ‘notice’ is better than ‘warning,’ but they’re all thinking about the language underlining the tension. They’re asking, ‘What is the purpose here?’”

He said changing the language does not solve the problem, but it is a simple and manageable step in restructuring systems to achieve student success.

“It’s not as if you don’t have to do a whole lot of things,” he said, “but this is something that can be low cost and relatively low effort.”

Bowman addressed the problems related to putting students on probation in an op-ed published by *Inside Higher Ed* in March. He noted that while administrators say they want to help and support students placed on academic probation, “students instead report a variety of negative emotions from being placed on probation—students have said they felt blindsided by this placement, or they felt like a failure and embarrassed as a result.”

Bowman and a colleague examined the impact of academic probation on four-year graduation at an unnamed public university, using a sample of nearly 10,000 students across a variety of majors. “The results were jaw-dropping,” he wrote.

- Placing students on academic probation based on overall GPA reduced their chances of four-year graduation by 40 percent.
- Academic probation based on early overall GPA cut students’ four-year graduation rate in half.
- Probation based on semester GPA reduced the chances of graduating in four years by about two-thirds. In other words, if a student was very close to the semester GPA cutoff but not placed on academic probation, they were three times more likely to graduate on time than if they were placed on probation.
- When examining whether students were retained the year after they were placed on probation, the negative effects were largest when probationary placement happened later in college. Therefore, focusing only on probation that occurs during the first year may underestimate the impact of this placement on overall student success.

Bowman co-authored a paper based on the study in February asking, “What Is the Purpose of Academic Probation?” and calling it “pervasive” and arguing that “the lasting impact—and arguably even the purpose—of academic probation is unclear.”

Boretz and others at Cal State Fullerton are spreading the word of their embrace of “academic notice.” She and Cathy Rivas, an academic adviser at the university, presented

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about the language change at the 2021 National Conference on Academic Advising and they are scheduled to do so again at NACADA conferences in May and October.

“We’ve just started to open up to a national audience,” Boretz said.

It remains to be seen if the reception will be widespread, but she said her own university system embraces it in principle if not in action yet.

“We are very progressive and are very conscious about things like equity in language and in culture,” she said. However, “a word change isn’t enough without continued structural change ... We’ve heard people say, ‘It’s just a word,’ but we’re changing more than just a word. It’s like the saying ‘Change your words, change your actions.’”

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