

EXPLORATORY ESSAY


# Supporting Students on the (Academic) Margins: An Equity-Driven Framework

Emily Virtue  
Erika Lytle Lett  
Grace Cheshire  
Diamond Brown  
Whitney Gregory

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Emily Virtue, PhD**, is an assistant professor of Educational Research and the director of the Educational Leadership Program at Western Carolina University. Dr. Virtue has held various student affairs positions at different institutions of higher education and has been responsible for student wellness, activities, leadership development, retention, and community engagement. Her previous publications focus on pedagogical practices, supporting students in academic difficulty, and addressing systems that prevent student success in higher education. Her recent research centers on asset-based pedagogical practices in middle and secondary settings.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1466-9078>

**Erika L. Lett, EdD**, is the executive director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College. Dr. Lett has held numerous positions in the community college sector, including her roles as a faculty member, interim chair of the Communication Department, as well as chair of Academic Inclusiveness and Equity Initiatives. Her research interests focus on exploring how identity and culture influence instruction and policies, especially as those practices relate to the equitable treatment of people of color. She also enjoys examining communication practices of effective leaders in higher education.

**Grace Cheshire, EdD**, is an instructor of Human Communication at Western Carolina University. Dr. Cheshire has experience working in both administrative and faculty positions at the community college and university level. Her research interests as a scholar-practitioner focus on the

intersection of communication and education, specifically through the lens of equity and social justice. She also enjoys exploring the connection between culturally responsive teaching and student sense of belonging, as well as faculty cultural competence and communication in predominantly white institutions.

**Diamond Brown, MA**, (she/her) currently serves as the AU core assessment analyst at American University. Both in her current role and previous ones, she has held a keen eye for working smarter while improving equitable student experiences. Through various opportunities she has been able to support students individually, focus on teaching practices as an instructor, and offer support to colleagues. Prior to AU, Diamond worked in the Office of Student Retention at Western Carolina. Her work focuses on the intersection of individual relationships centered on empathy, compassion, and big-picture thinking.

**Whitney Gregory, MEd**, serves as assistant dean of students at Elon University. With over 16 years of experience in higher education, she previously held leadership roles in the areas of health promotion, student care and outreach, and student conduct. A 2022 recipient of the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award for excellence of character and service to humanity, Gregory has focused her career on advancing holistic wellbeing, restorative practices, and equity-driven processes to center student voices and experiences. Gregory is currently pursuing a doctorate in educational leadership at Western Carolina University.

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**T**hough many colleges and universities claim to be driven by missions that highlight access, equity, and student success, academic policy and practice do not always mirror these claims. American higher education institutions are “obsessed with smartness” (Astin, 2017), yet fail to support educational attainment in an equitable manner. Educational inequality has its roots in PK–12 education (Dorn, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2007) particularly as it relates to deficit ideology. The manifestations of deficit ideology in higher education are most starkly seen in how students on academic warning (also

### Corresponding Author

Emily Virtue, PhD, Educational Leadership  
Western Carolina University  
91 Killian Building, 210-B | Cullowhee, NC 28723  
Email: [evirtue@wcu.edu](mailto:evirtue@wcu.edu)

referred to as academic probation) are treated both in action and by policy. For higher education institutions to meet their missions for access, equity, and success, they must address how their “systems of support” perpetuate deficit thinking. As the nature of higher education and the demographics of those enrolled continues to change and diversify, the time is right for higher education practitioners to interrogate and change harmful practices. We offer a framework for how institutions can build capacity for academic support program staff to identify deficit practices that systemically perpetuate inequities, so we no longer hinder student growth and academic success.

Deficit ideology, as defined by Gorski (2011), is a “worldview that explains and justifies outcome inequalities by pointing to supposed deficiencies within disenfranchised individuals and communities” and “discounts sociopolitical context, such as the systematic conditions (racism, economic injustice, and so on) that grant some people greater social, political, and economic access, such as to high-quality schooling, than others” (p. 153). Students entering American colleges and universities have been raised in educational systems steeped in deficit-based practices and surrounded by deficit-based speech. Standardized tests pit students against one another, highlighting few who are “smart” and relegating others to “career-ready” tracks that suggest students do not have what it takes to succeed in postsecondary education. Despite the growing literature outlining the benefits of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and asset-based thinking (Ayala & Contreras, 2019; Duran et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2021) higher education’s collective practices and policies remain focused on what students lack rather than what our systems and employees can do to address our own biases and systemic inequities.

Inherent in our understanding of a university’s role in student success (or lack thereof), is the organizational structure on which our offices are built. Most colleges and universities operate under structural functionalism. Structural functionalism “focuses on efficiency” and centers on approaches that are bureaucratic, reliant on “top-down” leadership, and are “not oriented toward equity” (Capper, 2019, p. 4). Organizationally, higher education thrives on bureaucracy, order, and staying within the lines. One can see the effects of structural functionalism in how students on academic warning are

treated. Students are often given strict parameters to “return to good standing” that include cumbersome policies, procedures, and unrealistic goals—all of which are devoid of an acknowledgement that students are complex beings who have found themselves in academic difficulty for a variety of different reasons. Knowledge acquisition, arguably higher education’s primary directive, is not orderly. To deny the reality of student circumstances is to maintain systems that perpetuate oppression and stymie success.

Gatekeeping systems for students are grounded in structural functionalism—that is, policies and guidelines that drive the higher academic system are rigidly objective. Versalle (2018) found that students often do not understand their proximity to dismissal when they are put on warning, and as such do not appropriately change behaviors. While almost every institution of higher education has some form of academic warning or probation policy, these are often grounded in a *sink-or-swim mentality* that assume academic success and persistence are the choice of the student (Cherry & Coleman, 2010). Rather than an opportunity to identify students in need of enhanced support or other interventions, some institutions may frame their policies as an opportunity to ensure the academic prestige of a university by “retaining only talented and motivated students” (Cornelisz et al., 2020, p. 2176). Academic probation without any other intentional interventions has an extremely small impact on academic improvement and persistence (Sneyers & DeWitte, 2017). Thus, structural functionalist policies perpetuate the

cycle of blaming the student who is struggling, failing to provide appropriate interventions, and then affirming deficit ideology by dismissing the student as “untalented” or “unmotivated.”

We offer a new framework built upon critical epistemologies that would require systems to move beyond structural functionalism to a more student centered, whole-person approach to academic success. This new framework will allow practitioners to be more conscious of their epistemologies and eschew structural functionalism from their practices. First, we provide a review of the ways in which students on academic warning have been treated, including how students arrive at academic difficulty. We then present a model for student affairs professionals to use in order to better support struggling students.

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## Students on Academic Warning

Traditionally, students on academic warning are seen as a problem to be fixed—a perspective that places much (if not all) of the blame on the student's behavior. These deficit-based beliefs, combined with a lack of appropriate support, result in negative outcomes, particularly for those who hold underprivileged identities and are at a higher risk of attrition and endure substantially more obstacles to academic success (Brost & Payne, 2011; Monroe, 2022; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Academic warning is particularly treacherous for students who come from marginalized backgrounds, especially first-generation students, students of color, and students with lower socioeconomic status (Frink, 2021; LeSavoy, 2010; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Additionally, first-generation students have been found to have less successful outcomes than their second and continuing-generation peers. Researchers often point to a lack of academic preparation as an indicator for poor outcomes (Higgs et al., 2021), thus placing the blame on the student and effectively reducing positive expectations of students based on performance measures that were the fruit of deficit-based systems. Due to the systemic barriers that create challenges for marginalized students, being placed on academic warning can negatively impact students' academic identity and ability to cultivate academic success (Robinson & Beach, 2019). Students may internalize these narratives, believing they have failed and espouse a negative academic identity based on shame (Virtue et al., 2020). Recent research, however, has moved beyond focusing on academic preparation as the reason for difficulty and highlighted social, emotional, and mental health concerns as factors that lead to poor academic outcomes (Bledsoe, 2019; Versalle, 2018).

## Theoretical Perspectives

In this section, we outline the three major theoretical perspectives that influence our framework. In each section, we demonstrate how deficit-based ideologies and practices have influenced traditional approaches to student support.

### Student Development

Academic institutions are tasked with ensuring students who matriculate are able to successfully earn their degree. Many student development theories suggest that student engagement, retention, and persistence can be directly correlated to deficit-based ideology. Here, we focus on Schlossberg's (1989) mattering and marginality theory to articulate the weight deficit-based ideology carries as an obstacle to student success for our most vulnerable students.

Schlossberg's (1989) theory focuses on the

relationships students form and maintain during their college experience wherein they feel as though they matter to or feel marginalized by others. Marginality is defined "as a sense of not fitting in that can lead to self-consciousness, irritability, and depression" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 518). Students who are considered the most academically disadvantaged, including but not limited to racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation, and students from lower socioeconomic statuses are most likely to feel the effects of marginality. It is no coincidence that students who are categorized into groups commonly marginalized on college campuses also have lower rates of academic success and higher attrition rates (Simpson, 2016). Previous research has shown that students on academic warning or those labeled as *at-risk* or *underprepared* can feel marginalized because their performance, and therefore their identity, is labeled as *less than* and different from their peers (Mann, 2008; Virtue, 2019). Stigmas and stereotyping attached to such labels support a deficit-focused environment that decreases the probability students on the academic margins will seek support. Systematically, higher education and its employees have played significant roles in students' academic performance. Yet, practitioners often talk about solving these poor outcomes as the job of the student rather than critically reviewing the educational system.

Deficit ideology can trap students on academic warning in a cycle of poor performance. Students underachieve, and staff react as though the student was destined to do so. Staff cultivate an atmosphere that indicates a lack of belief in and support for the student, mired with policy and additional requirements that can overwhelm an already stressed student and result in continued poor performance. Research has shown that students can harbor these negative views of themselves and thus believe they cannot accomplish challenging academic tasks (Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Vyvial, 2021). Such deficit-based practices maintain a system that further marginalizes students and substantiates factors that push students to leave a university. These practices and attitudes maintain inequitable systems that privilege high-achievers and marginalize those who struggle.

### Sense of Belonging and Culturally Relevant Practices

Non-instructional staff are positioned in front-facing roles that offer opportunities to build important relationships with students. However, those who operate from a deficit-based lens and victim-blaming mindsets present a barrier for crucial relationships to form (Hlinka, 2017). Previous research has determined "educators that have direct contact with students play an important role in creating students' sense of belonging" and that cues about



whether or not a space is welcoming can come directly from faculty and staff (Hurtado et al., 2015, p. 73). Students' histories inform the identities they carry into the institution, which is why culturally relevant practice (see Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011) remains critical to building sense of belonging and subsequently supporting students facing academic probation.

*Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (CRP) provides guiding principles for this work as it offers the opportunity to confront deficit-based practices and better support students facing academic difficulty. Developed by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in the early 1990s, CRP focuses on three pedagogical tenets: academic success, cultural competence, and a critical sociopolitical consciousness (Larke, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011). CRP was first presented with teachers in mind, though much of this work can cross-functional areas and be used in practitioner settings as well. Because this paper is aimed at those in student support positions, we use the term *practices* rather than *pedagogy*. Academic success relates to an educator's<sup>1</sup> environmental awareness and management. Not only must educators know their subject matter, they must also uphold strong academic expectations while making the content relevant to students. Cultural competence refers to an educator's ability to know the student and their background and incorporate those backgrounds into the learning materials so the student sees themselves reflected in what they are learning while being educated about larger ideas in a safe environment (Ladson-Billings, 2011). The level of cultural competency demonstrated by an educator regarding students' backgrounds can make all the difference in their achievement and success, especially for those students on academic probation (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Hlinka, 2017; Hutto, 2017; Martinez & Munsch, 2019; Miller & O'Daniel, 2019; Wood, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010).

Welcoming, embracing, integrating, and celebrating students' culture is a way to increase sense of belonging for marginalized students (Carales & Hooker, 2019; Martinez & Munsch, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> We use "educator" as a blanket term for both faculty and staff working in higher education because all support personnel are at some level educating students

<sup>2</sup> Environment refers to any space in which a practitioner has control/authority such as a classroom, office space, etc.

Finally, critical social consciousness is a pedagogical approach that encourages teachers and students to critically examine the sociopolitical issues that affect the world—this aspect more than the three others is what we are calling practitioners to explicitly do in practice. Moreover, using this critical lens, students should feel compelled to challenge the status quo that perpetuates inequitable outcomes for certain groups of people (Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). CRP practices are particularly important to implement for students who are on warning because such choices will signal to students that their professors know them and are willing to work with them, rather than just expect requirements to be met independent of one's personal struggles.

### An Equity-Focused Framework of Support

Student success is inextricably linked to environmental factors, particularly those related to pedagogical practices and faculty and staff attitudes. Though American higher education institutions have seen an increased call for equity on campus, those platitudes are often met with surface-level programming that does not weave into the fabric of our pedagogical practices or change the climate for how some students are perceived. Such practices are still opt-in: if an educator feels so inclined, they may enact equitable practices, but most are in no way obligated to make change. This remains most evident in institutional norms regarding students in severe academic difficulty. Deficit-focused practices (both at the institutional and personal level) often prohibit success and can actively work against student progress.

In order to see visible change in our students wherein academic success despite difficulty is possible, we offer a new framework. The equity framework (see Figure), which uses mattering and marginality as its foundation, prioritizes identifying and eliminating systematic barriers which may increase student sense of belonging and academic success—note that asset-based ideology encompasses the figure to demonstrate how these beliefs must permeate each aspect of the work. The framework presented below should serve as a minimal expectation for those working with students in academic difficulty; however, we posit that institutional change is unlikely to occur unless all educators reframe their thinking and practices in this manner. This framework, at its core, asks

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faculty and practitioners to take back the onus of educational responsibility. For too long, our systems have glorified educational autonomy and, when necessary, used it as a scapegoat for poor academic outcomes. We suggest that using this framework will shift perspectives from deficit thinking (e.g., “Our students are failing; therefore, they need to change”) to systemic thinking (e.g., “We’re failing to prepare our students. How can we change?”), ultimately resulting in more equitable practices for students on the academic margins.

### Figure

*An Equity-Based Framework of Support*



*Note.* This figure demonstrates how the connection between student development, the reframing of deficit ideology, and culturally relevant pedagogy influence sense of belonging and student academic success.

### Student Development

In order for staff to reframe their thinking about student success, they must understand basic concepts related to student development theory. In particular, it is vital to acknowledge where students may be developmentally as they progress through their collegiate career. Traditional-aged college students continually undergo developmental growth throughout their journey in higher education—they do not arrive on campus with the necessary development required to achieve in all aspects of their collegiate experience. Astin (2017) rightly argued our obsession with “smartness” ignores the developmental milestones that are pivotal to student success.

Goldrick-Rab & Strommel (2018) summarized a common lamentation faculty express: students do not meet their expectations. When students fail to reach expectations, institutions with deficit-focused mindsets create additional barriers to persistence for students in poor standing. If our students are not where we want them, it is incumbent on us to

get them there. Rather than focus on failure at the individual, student level (which Valencia [1997], described as a deficit-based practice), we ought to look at failure from a system level with regard to pedagogical practices. Students, after all, are enrolled in institutions of higher education to learn—the expectation that they arrive on our campuses already knowing how to learn and succeed is nonsensical. Not only should we understand that developmentally students entering college have learning to do, particularly about how one can succeed in higher education, they should be paired with the strongest teachers. Lopez (2019) rightly argued that first-year students and those who need the most guidance ought to be taught by those with the most experience. She reminds us that students meet our expectations and suggests we set expectations “high and meet them on the summit to address the challenges they may encounter rather than lament and wallow in the trenches” (p. 69). To accomplish this goal, pedagogical shifts must take place wherein the expectation of instructors is centered on ability and potential rather than perceived deficits.

In practice, we need to consistently provide students with individualized solutions rather than supplying generic, catch-all advice. This may include creating classes or workshops that specifically teach students how to study and prepare. Such skills should be proactively taught to all students rather than reactively to students who have been identified as on the cusp of failure. Traditionally, these skills are offered for those who lack in some way (i.e., “if you don’t know how to study, go ask the Learning Center for help”). Articulating support services as an extension of skills students currently have, however, shows how they can build on their assets rather than highlighting deficits (i.e., “learning these skills will strengthen the way you approach critical problem solving”).

### Adopting Asset-Based Beliefs

Disrupting deficit-focused processes will require staff to examine their own practices and biases. These concepts may be new and uncomfortable for many yet can serve as the cornerstone for change. Institutional leaders will need to engage in an examination not only of their practices (and those of their employees) but of the policies in place that prioritize efficiency over student success. For example, cumbersome, one-size-fits-all requirements (such as semester-specific GPA and completion rates or additional class requirements) can place undue stress and harm on students who are eager to succeed. Examining the purpose of these requirements, and more importantly, identifying who the policy benefits should be of chief concern. To suggest that students are deficient diminishes their spirit and sends

a message to them that the institution places its belief in an inequitable system over the belief that students can succeed.

It is essential for educators to reframe their deficit thinking and practices to those that are asset-based such as focusing on a student's cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and aspirational capital (Ayala & Contreras, 2019; Garcia et al., 2021). At the individual level, educators must examine their expectations of, and communication with, students. Those in student support roles are often the employees who communicate readily with students on warning by explaining status, appeals processes, and conditions required to return to good standing. In each interaction, staff can communicate deficit-based beliefs or asset-based beliefs. The distinction here is noteworthy because it may very well set the tone for how students expect to be treated moving forward. If a staff member/administrator burdens the student with nothing more than deadlines, expectations, and a complicated web of how to "get out," it is likely the student will see the status of being on warning as process-based and may not understand where help may reside. Further, if communication is not student-centered to the individual, the student may sense they are alone in their academic situation—while someone may help navigate the technical aspects, the process could feel cold, devoid of support, and perhaps even derogatory. To ameliorate these negative outcomes, staff should take an individualized approach: understand how the student arrived on warning (it's likely not the cause of academics alone! See Bledsoe, 2019; Brost & Payne, 2011; Versalle, 2018), help the student identify their own academic assets, and co-construct a plan with the student to navigate the requirements to return to good standing, including items such as choosing appropriate classes, proactively scheduling support services such as tutoring or mental health support and starting each meeting with the student based on what has gone well.

### **Culturally Relevant Practices and Sense of Belonging**

Research indicates that faculty implementing culturally relevant pedagogy into their classrooms promotes positive gains for students, including increasing their sense of belonging and mattering (Bryd, 2016; Carales & Hooker, 2019; Eagan & Kezar, 2008; Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020; Miller & O'Daniel, 2019; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2009; Wood & Turner, 2010). These practices can be used outside of the classroom as well. When advising students who either have been placed on academic warning or are likely to be given probation status at an institution, the use of culturally relevant practices by advisors becomes even more crucial. Research demonstrates

that students spend just as much time interacting with staff—including advisors, retention officers, and support services staff—as they do with their classroom instructors (Duggan, 2008; Gibson-Harman et al., 2002). These front-serving roles offer vital opportunities to utilize culturally relevant practices to foster belongingness, despite probation status.

As staff members foster environments that acknowledge and embrace the myriad of cultural backgrounds of their students and demonstrate culturally relevant practices, the factors that contribute to the lack of sense of belonging for students on the academic margins can be minimized. In practice, this may include advisors learning more about the student, their goals, and family expectations and obligations related to their education. Studies indicate that individual guidance based on care and support can increase positive outcomes (Arcand & Le Blanc, 2012; Capello, 2019). For example, practitioners may center student identity as a positive indicator of success (see Simpson, 2016). Additional examples of using culturally relevant practices for those in advising roles include:

1. Devoting time to understanding the student's background. Without this first step, finding the right culturally relevant practices will be difficult. For example, some students who are caregivers or working might need to know what nontraditional tutoring options exist. Or students from different religious backgrounds might need help communicating with their instructors around holidays not observed on campus.
2. Knowing what resources on campus might benefit students on warning, such as tutoring centers or counseling services (this involves having the location of these services and the hours of operation, as well as who to contact).
3. Offering to network between students to create mentorships on campus, especially involving students who have successfully navigated the academic warning system in the past.
4. Taking the lead on reaching out to other resources on campus and including the student on the email/phone call to facilitate communication directly between the student and others. This approach models how to communicate professionally for students who might be uncomfortable or lack this knowledge while lending your credentials to ensure the student's needs are met.
5. Checking in with the student more than once a semester at advising times (special care should be taken around religious holidays, the midway point in the semester, after any academic breaks, etc.).



6. Being honest and realistic with students on academic warning. Students may be inclined to take on heavier loads or face steep uphill climbs to lose their probation status, so it is vital that advisors are mindful of student assets, as well as areas for continued monitoring. This may involve encouraging students to set realistic goals in terms of credit hours and classes they are enrolling in for future semesters.

The importance of being aware of avoiding deficit mindsets as advisors and educators through culturally relevant practices can help shift the narrative from judgement for *not having* college-ready students toward empathy and a willingness to be student-ready colleges. Furthermore, educators who continually work on their cultural competency by engaging in authentic and affirming practices to support students are also able to dismantle their own deficit thoughts, which can maneuver students away from the risk of being placed on academic warning.

### Conclusion

As college student enrollment will continue to diversify and student enrollment to reflect those who have experienced years of trauma connected to life and schooling in a global pandemic, our hope is academic support offices will take a deep look and change practices to better support all students, particularly those who find themselves in academic difficulty. We encourage educational leaders to use this model to better prepare student affairs professionals to support their most vulnerable students. Each college and university system has a unique system to work with students on warning, yet our argument is for all: without addressing deficit-based ideology wherein students feel as though they belong and matter and are taught/mentored/advised in culturally appropriate ways we will never see lasting changes to our students or poor academic outcomes.

Ultimately, creating more equitable outcomes for students in academic difficulty requires structural change to how our institutions view and subsequently support these students. In order to build a more comprehensive approach to caring for students on the academic margins, the process must first begin with self-reflection on a personal level to identify, examine, and confront deficit ideology in our thoughts and practices. The development of individual critical consciousness must happen before the inequities enshrined in our policies and procedures at the institutional level can be addressed. Pivoting to a model of caring for all students in our institutions requires us as practitioners to move beyond an obsession with “smartness” and toward the recognition that

every student has potential, and our role is to foster and nurture that potential. Without undertaking this crucial work, our most vulnerable students will continue to be unfairly trapped in a cycle of inequity that is essentially of our own design.

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