

Academic probation and companioning: Three perspectives on experience and support

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This qualitative study explored the process of academic companioning as experienced by five undergraduate probationary students and as supported by two professional resource persons. Data was collected through multiple in-depth interviews and analyzed using a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which provided a fitting framework for a thematic narrative analysis. A document analysis was also used to determine how the conceptual foundation of the academic companioning program aligned with the students' experience. Our analysis suggests congruence between the multiple sources of data examined. Key findings shed light on the nature of the companion's role defined by a specific form of guidance and attendance to students' self-confidence. Findings also illustrate how the program's structure caters to students experience by facilitating an acknowledgement their own needs, helping them better understand the university context, and offering personal support.

Keywords: academic probation; academic companioning; experience; narrative inquiry; document analysis

Introduction

The topic of academic attrition, defined as the termination of student membership (Bean, 1980) is abundantly discussed in the literature. With regard to the circumstances of termination, however, an important distinction must be acknowledged. Indeed, while some students voluntarily withdraw from their program of study, others are dismissed (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Tinto, 1975; 1987; Vaughan, 1968). This warrants a focus on a specific population of students who are on the verge of dismissal, but who do not wish to withdraw from their program of studies. In fact, probationary students are in an in-between space flanked by satisfactory academic standing and mandatory withdrawal (Arcand & Leblanc, in press a).

In a budding field of research, most studies currently available on academic probation are descriptive and focus on student characteristics, reasons leading to probation, and programs implemented to assist probationary students. Contrasting with this restricted scope, researchers have called for an examination of probationary as experienced by students (Ryan & Glenn, 2002-2003; Shao, Hufnagel, & Karp, 2009-2010; Thomas, 2003; Vander Schee, 2007). At the same time, professionals and practitioners express the need to focus on the lived experience of those who struggle in higher education (Glasser, 2009; Nance, 2007; Zuzelo, 2000). Accordingly, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of one academic companioning¹ program as

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¹ As further discussed in the following pages, we use Wolfelt's (1999; 2004) term "companioning" in this text as it justly translates the helping relationship as the heart of the support program in question.

experienced by undergraduate probationary students and as supported by professional resource personnel.

Academic probation

An analysis of the literature indicates that academic probation is not formally defined as yet. In view of that we have elsewhere proposed a preliminary conceptualization suggesting that (a) students were put on academic probation when their grade performance was below a satisfactory threshold; (b) those on academic probation could remain in their program of study but must increase their grades; and (c) they would be dismissed if they did not (Arcand & Leblanc, in press a, b). In other words, we suggest that academic probation can be seen as a transition between unsatisfactory performance to either acceptable academic standing or to dismissal. These elements of definition have yet to be examined and confirmed in order to provide a solid foundation for the burgeoning body of research on academic probation.

Conditions of academic probation

Institutions define their criteria of academic probation, which vary from one university to the other. In the large Canadian urban university where this study took place, students must maintain a minimum cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 3.5 on 10 in the general bachelor's programs and 4.5 on 10 in the honors bachelor's program in order to be in good academic standing. As per the university's regulations on mandatory withdrawal, a student whose CGPA falls below these required minimums may remain registered in his program of study, but will be on academic probation until his CGPA reaches satisfactory standing. If this condition is not met after two sessions or 24 course credits, the student will be required to withdraw from his program. In addition to these grade specifications, withdrawal is mandatory when a student fails 18 course credits or when he fails a compulsory course twice.

Academic support programs

Most institutions of higher education offer support programs to provide probationary students with tools and strategies to raise their CGPA. Seeing as there are no guidelines mandating the development of probationary programs, they vary greatly in terms of structure, format, and theoretical foundation (Lindsay, 2000). For instance, support is offered through group workshop-based interventions (Coleman & Freedman, 1996; Humphrey, 2005-2006; Shao et al., 2009-2010), individualized academic advising (Mann, Hunt, & Alford, 2003-2004; Newton, 1990) or combined forms of interventions (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2006-2007; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Concurrently, some support programs emphasize learning skills (e.g., note taking, examination anxiety reduction, time management; Mann et al.) while others focus on personal support (Kamphoff et al.). Finally, length and time commitment vary from one session (Hildreth, 2006) to semester long interventions (Mann et al.).

Little research has addressed students' lived experiences of academic probation or the support process although this should not be overlooked (Vander Schee, 2007). Studies collected probationary students' stories in order to better understand the experience of being on academic probation (Arcand & Leblanc, in press b; Thomas, 2003). However, more attention and sound research must be devoted to understand the experience of academic companioning, given a probationary status.

Academic companioning

In the U.S. literature, a major component of probationary programs is called "academic advising". Three approaches of academic advising prevail; (a) prescriptive advising : an outcome-

oriented course of action whereby the expert advisor pinpoints the needs of the student and proposes a plan of action (Molina & Abelman, 2000; Vander Schee, 2007), (b) developmental academic advising : a collaborative, process-oriented, and aims to help the student develop holistically as an educated adult (Harrison, 2009; Vander Schee), and (c) intrusive advising : high involvement advising which emphasizes the advisor – advisee relationship, proposes assistance activities on a regular basis, and fosters student motivation and responsibility (Molina & Abelman; Vander Schee; Schwebel, Walburn, Jacobsen, Jerrolds, & Klyce, 2008).

The francophone literature employs the expression of “*accompagnement scolaire*” to designate a similar process described as an approach that capitalizes on the support relationship and advocates doing with, rather than doing for. This comprehensive, personalized and individualized support seeks to help the student take ownership of his progress and regain confidence in his capacities as a student (Dozot & Romainville, 2004; Glasman, 2001; Romainville, 2000; Romainville & Noël, 1998). We believe the term and definition of *companionship* translates justly the notion of “*accompagnement*” as a helping relationship that promotes being present to another person, respecting the person’s needs, and listening with the heart (Wolfelt, 1999; 2004). In keeping with this conceptualization, the term *companion* is proposed to describe the person who has the role of walking alongside and being patiently present to the other, seeking to stir their inner force and find new connections in their world (Wolfelt, 2009). Accordingly, we use the expressions *academic companionship* and *academic companion* in the following pages.

Methodology

A main genre through which the meaningfulness of an experience can be conveyed is the story (Polkinghorne, 1988). Whether told to oneself or to others, the story is a fundamental type of data accounting for experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Appropriately, the experience of academic probation and companionship has been explored through an analysis of narratives of life stories. Specifically, Clandinin and Connelly (2000, 2007), drawing on Dewey’s work (1958, 1934/2005, 1938/1997), propose a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to the study of storied experience characterized by continuity, interaction, and situation. To be more precise, investigations of this nature focus on the temporal dimension, that is they situate the story in a given time, with a past, a present, and a projected future. They also address social interactions as they represent a significant aspect of a lived experience. Finally, they detail the contextual milieu of a storied experience as a major factor informing the interpretation. These concepts have guided our analysis of the experience of academic probation and companionship.

The main strategy of data collection used in this study was qualitative interviews, generating three perspectives, that of the students, the academic companion, and the program developer. In so doing, we collected an emic point of view from three different angles (Merriam, 2009). A document analysis was also helpful to understand the institutional context of academic companionship and probationary experience. The data collection and analysis procedures are described below but first, we present the participants involved in this study.

Participants

A letter of recruitment was sent to the 24 students who took part in an academic companionship program in the fall 2007. Five students expressed an interest in the current study and completed the data collection in the fall 2008. Aged between 20 and 22² years, they were registered in their second, third or fourth year of studies in various undergraduate programs in a large urban Canadian university. Four participants were women and one was a man. Three were Anglophones

² One participant did not disclose her age.

and two were Francophones³. Pseudonyms were attributed to each study participant who are briefly profiled in the next paragraph.

Manelle, the first participant, was from a traditional family composed of both parents and a younger sister. Neither her parents completed postsecondary studies but they encouraged her to pursue an undergraduate diploma. She enjoyed school, worked independently, and obtained good grades in both elementary and high school. She transitioned to university in September 2005 and studied in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics.

Similarly, Eva grew up with both parents and an older sister. Her parents instilled discipline with regards to school and homework. She enjoyed elementary and high school studies, was generally eager to learn, and had been successful and involved as a student. She was studied in the Department of Visual Arts but she did not disclose when she was admitted.

Thirdly, Mark grew up with his mother, who worked two jobs to make ends meet, and two older stepsisters. His father and maternal grandfather were also important figures in his life. As he was growing up, his family moved numerous times, which required transitioning to different schools. Reportedly, he was not challenged in elementary and high school and put little effort in his studies. He was admitted in the General arts bachelor in the fall 2004.

Leena was an only child who grew up with both her parents, neither of whom attended university. In elementary school she generally obtained good grades and was involved in various extracurricular activities. Through the years good study habits gave way to a tendency to party and experiences with drugs and alcohol with high school friends. She entered the Department of Theatre in the fall 2004.

Anny grew up in a traditional family unit. Her parents did not attend university but hoped she would obtain a university degree. She described herself as independent in her schoolwork, saying she did not require much help from her parents or teachers and believed her journey in elementary and high school was ordinary and uneventful. She pursued undergraduate studies in the General Arts program in September 2003.

To enrich our analysis, we solicited the participation of key personnel involved in the development and delivery of the academic companioning program, namely the academic companion who worked with the five above-mentioned students and the program developer. An email invitation was sent and they both accepted to complete the data collection. Pseudonyms were used in this manuscript to protect their anonymity.

Connie, the academic companion held a degree in counseling and psychopedagogy. She had over 10 years experience as a learning specialist in a university. She was chosen as the academic companion in this specific program for her extensive knowledge of the university setting and the services it offered, her understanding of the variety and uniqueness of difficulties students face, her capacity to address cognitive as well as emotional aspects of student life, and her expertise in study skills and methods.

Denise, the program developer had a strong background in special education. As a learning specialist she had worked in the field of academic support and learning in higher education for over 15 years. She also conducted research on academic attrition and retention. Her extensive field and

³ Interviews with Francophone participants occurred in French and their quotes used in this manuscript have been translated by the authors.

research experience led her to envision and develop an academic companioning program aimed at supporting those students who are in deep academic struggle, that is, students facing mandatory withdrawal.

Document analysis

To grasp the experience of academic companioning of the study participants, we conducted a document analysis to delimit the companioning program's objectives and conceptual foundation (Holbrook, 1996). Texts associated to the program were analyzed according to the research purpose (Salminen, Lyytikäinen, & Tiitinen, 2000). They included (a) the university support services' web page, (b) a research proposal describing the rationale behind the development and implementation of the companioning program, (c) the program's logic model, and (d) a published article reporting on the effectiveness of the program (Phillion, Bourassa, Leblanc, Plouffe, & Arcand, 2010). Documents were carefully reviewed to uncover the frame wherein the program was developed, thus informing the condition of academic probation at the university where the study took place and the companioning process in which the participants were involved.

Qualitative interviewing

To trace the students' lived experiences and appreciate the meaning attributed to these experiences, we drew on Seidman's (2006) phenomenological approach to interviewing, an in-depth methodology. Specifically, the three-interview structure, conducted with the five students in this study, sought to (a) uncover details of the participant's early experiences, (b) understand current experiences with activities, social interactions, and endeavors, and (c) consider the meaning attributed to such experiences in the form of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about the stories shared. These student interviews were semi-structured, individual, face-to-face, informal conversations that lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. One student required a fourth interview to complete his story. In total, we thus completed 16 interviews with probationary students participating in the companioning program.

We conducted two additional single interviews with key personnel involved in the development and delivery of the academic companioning program. Specifically, the academic companion who worked with the five probationary participants and the program developer accepted to share their outlook. Each participated in one semi-structured, individual face-to-face interview that lasted approximately 60 minutes. The professional resource persons shared their experience, perspective, and philosophy of academic companioning from a practitioner and administrative viewpoint.

Findings stemmed from a total of 18 interviews with 7 respondents. They were investigated in view of Riessman's (2007) thematic narrative analysis, focusing on the content of storied accounts and the categorization of experience. The transcribed student stories and the two single interviews were imported in the Nvivo 8 software (QSR International, 2007) to map the shared experience. Interview segments that were particularly eloquent or recurring were classified into key themes. All three perspective were integrated in the same coding scheme but were distinguished in the interpretation phase as called for by the research purpose.

Findings

This qualitative study explored the process of academic companioning as experienced by five undergraduate probationary students and as supported by professional resource personnel. In this endeavor, we begin by describing the academic companioning program based on a document analysis. This, in line with the three-dimensional inquiry space, details the contextual milieu in which the experience took place.

Then, illustrating the temporal and social dimensions of the stories, we present an analysis of the interview data. This analysis defined the meaningful role of the academic coach as perceived by the three parties involved in the experience of academic probation. In a subsequent section we report the needs expressed by the students and contrast them to the perspective of the academic companion and the program developer.

Academic companioning program

The document analysis helps identify and understand the objectives, intentions, posture, and values in the implementation of the academic companioning program and thus place the probationary students' experience in context. The companioning program was offered as to students who had been required to withdraw from their program of study due to unsatisfactory grade performance. Winning an appeal to their mandatory withdrawal however, they were allowed to continue their studies while receiving academic support through a program tailored to their needs. The program proposed individual support for one term, by way of weekly one-on-one meetings with an academic companion. The program's approach sought to foster the development of rapport and trust between the academic companion and the student. The companion sought to understand the experience of the student, in and outside of university and offered support in relation to the particular challenges expressed.

The companioning process' objective was to facilitate the student's short and long term academic success by focusing on five broad dimensions of academic success including (a) defining or refining academic and/or professional goals, (b) developing essential learning strategies, (c) enhancing course content knowledge, (d) improving writing skills, and (e) examining personal challenges. Through a collaborative companioning process, the student and companion worked together to understand the student's needs and develop a personalized and structured learning plan, which was revisited periodically to better align the intervention. It was hoped that the student would reflect and learn about himself, his learning style, methods, and strategies, as well as his experience in higher education. Students were also encouraged to take advantage of the many support services offered on campus (e.g., academic writing help center, career services, student mentoring) as needed.

The first two program meetings consisted of semi-structured interviews on the student's university experience. Needs and goals with respect to the five above-mentioned program dimensions were a specific focus of the interviews, which informed the development of an individualized and flexible learning plan that launched the intervention. Additionally, the student was encouraged to keep a weekly reflective journal on his progression through the program. Lastly, a final interview re-examined the student's initial learning plan and assessed whether they remained relevant for him and to what extent specific objectives were met.

A previous study, which aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of this companioning program, indicated that it helped 15 out of 20 students to pursue their studies and 4 students to obtain their diploma (Philion et al., 2010). It does not, however, elucidate how the companioning process satisfied the students' experience and needs. In view of that, our analysis aimed to take a deeper look at the companioning process from the perspective of probationary students and that of professional resource personnel.

Academic companion's role

Discussions with the students and the professional resource persons concerned the three parties' perception of the role of the academic companion through the program. This helps further define the process of companioning and how it was experienced. Specifically, the practice of

guidance and the importance of attending to the self-esteem and self-confidence of students who have experienced failure were highlighted.

Guidance

The quality of the guidance offered through the companioning process emerged in the multiple sources of data. First, student viewpoint suggests that the companion's most evident task was academic monitoring, that is, observing the students' habits and study methods and helping them stay on target. Mark exemplified this thought:

Yeah, she provides support and encouragement. I think that the importance of the [companioning] program is to keep kids focused on what they're here to be doing, which is to learn. (...) I think that the program more than counseling students is just a constant reminder that yeah, you do have to put school first. I think that is great purpose.

In addition, Connie's ability to foster students' reflection on their own situation, needs, and solutions was mentioned and particularly appreciated by the students. For instance, Anny affirmed: "You do have to figure out for yourself but I think you need somebody that isn't that close to you to be able to guide you and ask the right questions." Anny, Manelle, and Leena also indicated that they needed a "reality check" in order to adjust their ways of doing in university. The companion's ability to foster reflection was important for them to gain some perspective and realign their ways of doing in university.

In this regard, it is interesting to introduce Connie's perspective on her own role as academic companion. She saw her role as that of a "pathfinder" helping students look into their daily reality to better appreciate their challenges and find their own solutions. "So let's see how you do things, and tell me why you [emphasis] think it's not working'. In her work as a companion she sought to understand the student's experience and guide their reflection with the purpose of adjusting the "how to" with new strategies.

Finally, we turn to Denise's vision of the companion's role as she developed the program. She specified that, for a successful academic companioning process, it was important to help the students increase their awareness of their own needs as she explained here: "In academic companioning, it's important to *do with*, as opposed to *do for*. If I can help my students become more reflective or metacognitive, I think I've done my job." She called attention to the importance of promoting the students' responsibility, as a key purpose of academic companioning is to offer a structure conducive to the students' engagement in their own studies.

Confidence

The interviews suggest that the companion's role was eminently affective. To begin with, the students stories indicated that the companion created a positive ambiance and helped them tap into a confidence that had been shattered in many cases. It appears that this was crucial in the companioning process as it was emphasized by Mark:

I think Connie's role was (pause) (...) in any situation she would put a smile on your face. She knows that no matter the situation, you can overcome it. You know, it's hope (...) providing hope to those that feel like they're not capable at that time. I think she knows that we're capable, I think that all kids here probably do know that they're capable but sometimes they just need to have that feeling of hope, you know, the feeling that things are gonna work out (...) we're gonna succeed.

Manelle's words indicate that her interactions with Connie helped her regain her motivation for

studies after hardships she qualified as a burnout. “[Connie] gave me that extra little push, that motivation. (...) I was just getting back on my feet and it was really good for me to have that motivation (...) it really helped me.” Along the same lines, Eva explained that working with her companion reinvigorated her after experiencing repeated failure in university and feeling depressed. Evidently, this helped her commit to and persist in her studies:

I always looked forward to going (...) I just remember, every time I’d meet her I’d be so refreshed. I had a class right after and like I was always looking forward to go to that class (...) When I finished [the program] I knew I was more eager to continue [my studies].

The student viewpoint expressed above seems congruent with Connie’s perspective on the students’ experience of academic probation. In her view, the personal component was of foremost importance and often iterated that the role of a companion in the context of academic probation entailed addressing self-esteem and self-confidence:

I also think that, in many cases, the student’s self-esteem is undermined following failures (...) So it was, for the majority of them, it was important to reassure them on their capacity to be successful in the university context and help them rebuild their confidence for the rest of her studies.

Similarly, the program developer recognized the adversity represented by academic probation. She highlighted that this experience was emotionally damaging, that it affected students’ self-esteem and often times, their self-concept. Therefore, alike the companion, she supported the need to rebuild and reinforce students’ self-esteem. She added, however, that students must also be able to adapt to the expectations of both the university and the workplace contexts: “We’re doing them a favor by helping them recreate their self-esteem but at the same time, students who will be successful on the work market are those who are capable of adapting. We need to foster both aspects.”

Catering to students’ needs

Our analysis sheds light on how the studied process of academic companioning caters to the needs revealed by the participating students. Contrasting the student perspective, the companion’s and program developer’s views allow showcasing this adjustment process, specifically with regards to the acknowledgement of their own needs, the familiarity with the university context, and personal support.

Acknowledgement of their own needs as students

An abundance of literature on the theme of academic probation speaks of students’ characteristics and shortfalls. Naturally, we expected students were aware of their needs. Paradoxically, when first asked about their needs, the students appeared unable to identify them. For instance, Anny confided: “I don’t know that I needed anything more at the time.” Through discussion and probing however, the students’ needs became apparent. In concordance to what is highlighted in the literature, they were multiple and various. For instance, Eva shared:

I would’ve liked somebody, like a mentor, somebody to tell me like, this is what is expected of you. (...) I needed also for study habits and concentration, prioritizing my time, things like that. I knew how to manage in high school but now I need different things.”

On his part, Mark struggled as he felt disconnected from his university. He stressed a dire need to fit in: “Didn’t feel like I belonged, and it was that absolute, it was an overwhelming feeling that I

needed to belong to something.” Leena experienced obstacles regarding daily life and finances: “I was trying but, I had to work to afford tuition fees, books, I’m in the Department of Theatre so I had to go to plays (...) I was so tired, I burned myself out, I was exhausted.”

The companion’s perspective harmonizes with what was expressed in the student interviews. Reinforcing the idea that students often have difficulty articulating their needs, Connie discussed the importance of helping them elucidate these needs. She emphasized that, in the companioning process, she did not position herself as an expert but favored an approach wherein she supported students’ acknowledgement and awareness of their situation and needs: “I don’t think it is right to say ‘Listen, this is what I, the expert, have decided we will do.’ And anyway, in many cases, the issues to address change and evolve.” In line with what emerged from the student stories, Connie also specified that the students experience particular situations and therefore, the obstacles they face are unique and quite varied.

The program developer’s view further supplements these emerging ideas. Her interview stressed the variety and multiplicity of obstacles struggling students face. Discussing the sources of impediments they experience, she enumerated many types of hindrances that complicate the undergraduate course. However, she explained that it was crucial to the companioning process to support the students’ thought process with regard to their education and obstacles to their success: “ (...) again, it’s about helping him reflect about his own needs.”

Familiarity with the university context

The data analysis revealed that the students, before their participation in the program, needed to acquaint themselves with the expectations of higher education. Their stories indicate that university studies are radically different from their high school experience, and that they did not know what was expected of them in higher education or how to navigate the university context. Manelle’s words translate well the idea that there was a sizeable gap between high school and higher education experience: “I had it easy in high school. I expected more work [in university] but I didn’t think it was gonna crash down like this, that it would be so fast, so much, so intense.” In addition to the highly diverging modes of functioning in high school and in university, the participants’ lack of understanding of university culture and expectations was exemplified by Leena when asked about her appreciation of academic expectations: “I had no clue. It took me at least two years to figure it out. (...) My priority at that time was really to understand what was going on and try to follow the rhythm.” It had been difficult for the students to navigate in a context where they felt they were expected to be self-sufficient, to fully integrate the university life, activities, and services, and to know the rules and conditions regulating their study process. Also, they did not grasp the requirements of a quality assignment or recognize what study habits were appropriate in higher education. They reported being uncomfortable and sometimes overwhelmed in a setting they characterized as impersonal and in which they had a lot of responsibilities and liberty.

Echoing the participants’ words, Connie suggested that it was essential for students to better grasp what was expected of them in university. “University is very different from high school. They have high expectations; spending two hours on a 12-page assignment is not enough, not in university. (...) In university, there are quite particular expectations, having good ideas is not sufficient anymore.” In light of this, an important component of her mission, as academic companion, was to help students learn about university level expectations so they could eventually satisfy them.

The program developer’s perspective also aligns with the students’ point of view. She suggests that the impersonal nature of a large university community and a lack of relational contact in a setting that rely more and more on web-based technologies influences students’ poor appreciation of university standards. She adds that students are used to operate in a highly structured high school

system and often transition with difficulty to the university context where the organization, supervision, and expectations contrast with what they are accustomed to:

They're just leaving high school, they're a little bit lost, everything has always been decided for them, they've been in an overly structured setting all their life and now they find themselves in a destabilizing context with little teaching or contact hours and a lot of work to accomplish.

An awareness of this challenging situation has led Denise to develop a program that was structured, with clear objectives, a personalized learning plan, designed activities, and one on one meetings with a companion in a collaborative process.

Personal support

The students' stories illustrate the physical and emotional distance that existed between their parents and them. For instance, Manelle expressed: "I was alone. (...) I don't see my parents often. (...) they're there in difficult moments but always at the end of the [telephone] line." Student stories indicated that they had distanced themselves with many childhood and high school friends by moving to a new city and focusing on their new lifestyle. They did meet fellow students in university but reported that these new acquaintances were not always significant and that in some cases they represented a distraction from studies when social life was prioritized. Concurrently, in the large university classes and impersonal setting, they experienced a rather detached contact with professors, which contrasted with the more involved relations they had described with high school teachers. Some students recounted that they sought to connect with university professors by discussing with them after class or during their office hours but they generally were not able to establish a satisfying rapport with them. Similarly, they generally did not obtain a meaningful form of support from university support staff as Eva described: "She [advisor at her faculty] told me what my options were. It was extremely impersonal. (...) I was afraid. (...) I wasn't asking for pity, I was just hoping for some support of some sort." It seems that a healthy supportive system was generally unavailable to them.

The companioning program personnel recognized the magnitude of the emotional needs normally fulfilled by family and friends. Connie reinforced the importance of the interpersonal dimension of her work with students. She believed the mutual connection and closeness between a resource person and student was central to the companioning process, and especially vital given the limited positive supportive relations from which the students benefited: "Companioning is a presence, someone who can hear things in a neutral zone (...) Often times, just naming a situation or problem the student struggles with is a form of liberation. (...) Companioning is above and beyond establishing a rapport with the other."

Denise's observations harmonize with the students' stories. In her interview, she described a variety of relational issues experienced by probationary students justifying the importance attributed to the individualized and personalized feature of the companioning program. She was evocative in this regard:

For some of them, it's a crisis; academic failure, breakups (...) pressure from peers, from family, competition with peers – to get into medicine for instance, financial problems – many students must work to provide for themselves, feeling isolated, a lack of emotional or cognitive resources (...) Much solitude (...) some students live away from their family, or have little support from their parents. (...) The parents, it's not that they don't want to help, they don't necessarily know how to, many students live on their own, their parents are not present to help, to pay attention to what they're doing.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of academic companioning as experienced by five undergraduate probationary students and as supported by professional resource personnel. We conducted multiple interviews (Seidman, 2006) with three parties involved in a companioning program and carried out a document analysis (Salminen, Lyytikäinen, & Tiitinen, 2000) to better understand the values and objectives informing this program. This data was useful to ascertain the congruence of the conceptual foundation and implementation of the program with the needs and experiences of students participating in it.

An in-depth examination of the lived experience of academic probation and companioning, as called for (Glasser, 2009; Nance, 2007; Zuzelo, 2000), was achieved through a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space and its focus on temporal, social, and contextual dimensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The methodology used allowed examining the meaning of a shared experience from multiple and emic perspectives. This fosters an understanding of the sense those involved with academic probation and companioning make of their own experience (Merriam, 2009).

The insiders' perspectives were evocative in detailing key factors in an experience of academic probation and companioning. Notably, the findings exceed the conventional bounds of the budding field of research on academic probation, which are generally limited to student characteristics, reasons leading to probation, and programs assisting probationary students.

Given its methodology and broadened findings, our examination allows making recommendations based on insights of those involved in a companioning process. The respondents in this investigation called attention to the program features that should be emphasized in the context of academic probation. Namely, the basic role of companioning should include a form of guidance that taps in the students' reflection with regards to their own academic situation, challenges, and potential solutions. Given the emotionally damaging outcome of academic probation, the companioning role should also address the affective quality of the experience.

Respondents also conveyed that the probationary students had to meet essential conditions. The three parties indicated the necessity for students to identify and acknowledge their needs in the university context, as these were generally not clear. The interviews also highlighted that the probationary students had difficulty adapting to the university context, as it largely differed from their high school setting. Finally, the students' stories draw attention to the distance that slowly embedded in their established relationships and the difficulty creating new ones in the university setting.

In the current bounded scope of research on academic probation, this article is a first step in mapping the experience of academic probation and companioning, from multiple and emic perspectives. It provides interesting insights on the companioning role and how the program catered to the students' needs. As a stepping stone in a developing field of research, this exploration fuels our curiosity about fruitful characteristics of the companion's role and approach, calling for an examination in greater detail the "how to" and "why" of academic companioning. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate diverse contexts. For instance, it would be profitable to examine the experience of academic probation and companioning in specific programs such as health sciences and medicine, engineering, education, and social sciences. It would also be of interest to investigate experience in collegiate, undergraduate and graduate programs. Finally, it would be valuable to conduct comparable studies in varied institutions in smaller cities and large metropolises, with a personalized atmosphere and large campus, and in various areas of the world.

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