Conversation Prompts:
Assisting Students Experiencing Academic Difficulty

These questions and suggestions could be used by advisors as a starting place to have quality conversations with students on academic probation. Below each heading are some suggested “conversation prompts” that might help to generate an open dialogue with students experiencing academic difficulties.

Warming Up:

Often students are ashamed of their probationary status and they may be nervous to talk with you about their semester. Opening the meeting with some small talk will help relieve some of the anxiety that the student may be experiencing. Be sure to communicate that you are willing to help the student, not to judge or lecture. Also, be sure to tell the student that you care about how he/she is doing in school, and that you want to help them succeed. Assure them that all college students need guidance from time-to-time, and that they are not alone in their academic journey. Consider sharing a story to reassure students that others have faced similar challenges and yet went on to be successful.

Explore the Issue:

Tell me about what happened last semester.
• Give the student a chance to tell his or her story. In some cases, this open-ended conversation starter is all that you’ll need. In other cases, you might need to ask some follow-up questions.
• As students tell you about last semester, this is a great time to “normalize” the experience of probation. Many students are embarrassed and/or think it only happened to them, when in reality hundreds of students are on probation. While we want students to take probation seriously, we want them to see it as a challenge to work through on their way to graduation.

What was going on in your life outside of class?
• Listen for “red flags” in the student’s account, including: health issues (including mental health issues), a personal/family tragedy, financial worries, working an unrealistic number of hours, lack of motivation or time management strategies, lack of a commitment to higher education, etc. The presence of any of these factors may mean that the student has the academic abilities to succeed at college-level work, but is not able to perform at his/her best. If this is the case, then it would be good to direct the student to appropriate resources, such as the Counseling Center, Financial Aid, Career Services, etc. A long list of student services can be found here: http://www.uwsp.edu/landingPages/Pages/studentServices.aspx

What does a typical week look like for you? How do you keep track of your time?
• Again, listen for various “red flags” that include academic and non-academic factors that might contribute to poor academic performance. Aside from reinforcing the importance of prioritizing the academic demands of college, this is also a good time to remind students that a realistic workload for just 12 credits of coursework amounts to anywhere from 24 to 36 hours of studying, homework, and reading outside of class. This also opens the door to discuss practical time management systems: day/month/semester planners, building in reminders on cell phones, using the Google / Outlook Calendars, etc.
Digging Deeper:

Sometimes students experience academic difficulties due to genuine academic struggles, and this might mean that the student was taking a single challenging class, taking several challenging classes at the same time, or taking classes that are truly beyond the student’s ability level. In some cases, students might not be employing appropriate time-management techniques or utilizing college-level study strategies. In other cases, a student might be experiencing interference from a disability. Here are several ways to think through these possibilities.

*Did you struggle with one specific class that pulled your GPA down, or did you struggle in all of your classes?*

- **Did the student fail just one class?**
  Failing just one class can be enough to turn an average semester into a semester on academic probation. If the problem seems to be a specific course, examine the student’s schedule for next semester to see if they have the same (or a similar) class next semester.
  - Discuss retaking the course so as to replace the grade, but also be sure to mention the various tutoring options available on campus, including the Tutoring-Learning Center, the Math Room, the Physics & Astronomy Tutoring Room, the Foreign Language Lab, etc.
  - Discuss the student’s perception/engagement with the course. Sometimes students may not recognize the value of a course, or do not see its connection to their career goals, and therefore they lack the motivation to apply themselves. Be prepared to explain the value of such courses to students, either with respect to the pursuit of a liberal education or within the context of the major.

- **Did the student fail multiple courses?**
  If the student failed multiple classes in a single semester, it is important to discuss several broad themes:
  - Does the student possess the basic academic abilities to succeed, along with a commitment to doing well, but just faced a tough semester? If so, they may just need some assistance to achieve their full potential. Seeking some additional help might be what’s needed: making use of office hours, forming study groups, receiving tutoring, etc. Beyond this, be prepared to suggest that in the future the student enrolls in fewer difficult courses during the same semester.
  - Does the student possess the basic academic abilities to succeed, but did not make school a priority or are not transitioning to the demands of college-level work? Ask the student about competing time commitments beyond academics (work, sports, socializing, family, clubs, etc.), as well as their approach to time management and the study strategies that they employ. Be prepared to advise the student to take steps to make academics a priority, employ effective time-management strategies, and develop study strategies appropriate for the demands of college.
  - While many students with disabilities possess the academic ability to succeed, they may not seek the kinds of accommodations that allow them to perform at their best.
    - Some students might be experiencing interference from previously diagnosed disabilities, but are not using accommodations through Disability Services. Encourage them to make use of the various accommodations available to them here at UWSP.
    - Other students might be experiencing interference from an undiagnosed disability. If this is the case, the student with an undiagnosed disability might not know to ask for help, or where to ask for help.
    - The Office of Disability Services can assist you with having conversations with students about disabilities.
Finally, if you still have serious concerns about the student’s abilities within the major, it might be worth examining whether or not the student’s major is a good match for their skills and abilities. However, it is important to avoid making the student feel abandoned by the department or the university when having conversations about changing majors. What is important is that the student finds a course of study that is both challenging but also suitable to their abilities and interests. This might require that that student explore their own career goals and understand the array of majors available on campus.

The Mathematics of Probation:

*Do you understand what it means to be on academic probation?
  * Even though they are notified about being on academic probation, many students do not understand what it means. Be prepared to explain academic probation to the student without reading it from the catalog.

*Do you understand how your GPA affects your major?
  * Many majors have additional GPA requirements beyond the 2.0 level. Be sure to explain to the student the consequences of being on academic probation (both from the perspective of graduating from UWSP and from the perspective of completing their major). The Student Academic Advising Center is a resource for students who need to explore other majors due to academic requirements.

*Can you explain to me what your GPA needs to be this semester to get back in good academic standing?*
  * Make sure the student has a realistic grasp of what needs to happen with his/her GPA to be back in good standing. This is a great time to show the student the GPA calculator available on the Registration and Records website https://mypoint.uwsp.edu/regrec/regrec069/

Offer Support, Provide Hope, and Review a Plan of Action:

*Are you familiar with any campus resources? Did you utilize any of them?*
  * This is a great time to ensure that students are aware of the resources UWSP offers. A list of relevant resources can be found here: http://www.uwsp.edu/landingPages/Pages/studentServices.aspx

*What is your goal for your time at UWSP?*
  * It is helpful to make sure students set specific, measurable, and realistic goals. A good short-term goal for the next semester might be to earn a 2.0 or a 2.5 GPA. Next, you might encourage students to think ahead two or three semesters, setting a goal to continue earning at least a 2.5 GPA each term. In the long-term, a good goal might be to earn a degree from UWSP.

*What do you plan to do differently this semester that will ensure you are successful?*
  * Ask students what steps they’ll take to ensure they meet their goals. For example, in order to improve their academic performance, students might need to limit their non-academic activities, develop more effective study skills and strategies, utilize tutoring, or repeat courses.
  * Encourage your student to articulate at least one or two changes that they will make. Without some sort of change, academic struggles are likely to continue.
  * Encourage the student to return mid-semester to let you know how they are doing. In addition to this, it would be good to contact the student to invite them in for a meeting mid-semester.