"Not the Kind of Student I Am"

College Students' Expression of Agency in Academic Appeals

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Abstract

Students who are academically suspended from an institution are often invited to explain their circumstances in an appeal letter, addressing what had happened and what will change. This study used a content analysis approach to examine 81 students' academic suspension appeals letters to understand their expressed sense of agency. We found students demonstrated some degree of agency and responsibility but failed to realize their potential as agents. Students linked their identities to their intended academic plans and timelines, often describing academic suspension as an identity threat. We discuss implications for policy, practice, and future research as

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supporting students in their academic journey is essential to college completion.

Introduction

Academic suspension is a near-universal policy in higher education that makes students ineligible for continued enrollment after one or more terms of academic probation or warning (Barouch-Gilbert, 2022). Like probation, suspension is an outcome based on a student's GPA. Often, students need to maintain a 2.0 (on a 4.0 scale) to remain in good academic standing. Students who fail to return to good academic standing, or meet other stipulated university requirements after a probationary semester, risk academic suspension (Casey et al., 2018; Ost et al., 2018). Academic suspension typically requires students to take a semester away from school, which impacts retention and degree completion (Bowlus, 2023; Dill et al., 2010). Along with the role they play in academic outcomes, academic difficulties impact students' academic integration into the institution and are related to a sense of belonging, elements linked to overall retention and completion outcomes among college students (Pascarella et al., 2005; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975, 2012).

Academic suspensions run counter to student retention because students stop out and, therefore, have fewer opportunities to build academic and social connections to the institution (McDermott, 2008; Tinto, 1975, 2012), such interactions between students, faculty and staff are especially critical for Students of Color to thrive in college (Erck & Sriram, 2022). The reasons why students struggle in classes vary widely, ranging from academic preparation (Warburton et al., 2001) to personal difficulties (Trombley, 2000). Universities provide different forms of support to students in order to prevent or manage academic difficulties. These efforts include services available to all students such as tutoring, advising, mentoring, and counseling, as well as targeted interventions for students struggling academically (Brooks-Harris et al., 1999; Dill et al., 2010; Humphrey, 2005; Sanders & Hutson, 2012). Support opportunities like these may be embedded in federally grant-funded programs like TRIO student support services (Mahoney, 1998) and are often part of the accreditation review process (Eaton, 2015). Despite these support efforts, some college students earn low grades that run counter to policies for continuous enrollment, leading to academic suspension.

Once a student is suspended, however, most universities offer an appeal process in which students try to persuade designated officials (often in writing) they should be allowed to continue their enrollment in the subsequent term rather than be suspended. At the site location

of this study, the suspension letter guided suspended students through this appeals process, prompting students to identify and explain what led to their academic underperformance and what they will do differently going forward to improve their academic outcomes. Reflecting on past challenges and making plans for addressing them in the future helped students convey a sense of agency. Even when events beyond their control might have derailed them, students were asked to demonstrate whether they possessed the wherewithal to adjust their plans and organize their actions to return to good academic standing and successfully complete their degrees. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how students' sense of agency was expressed through the academic suspension and appeals processes. Our research question was: *What elements of agency do students describe in their academic suspension appeals?*

Literature Review

This review of the literature includes academic probation and suspension policies, student support and outcomes, followed by the theoretical framework guiding this study.

Prior research studies of academic probation discovered variable outcomes. Fletcher and Tokmouline (2010) identified GPA improvements in the semester following probation, while Lindo et al. (2010) discovered students withdrew from school. Some studies found incentives only helped women, not men (Angrist et al., 2009), while others determined students used strategic course selection and withdrawals to maintain a higher GPA (Casey et al., 2018). Moss and Yeaton (2015) evaluated the effect of probation warning letters and observed that neither email nor hardcopy letters increased students' GPAs the following semester. While probation and suspension policies may lead to student attrition, such rules and regulations are part of the structure and regulation of higher education and federal financial aid (Eaton, 2015; Fuller, 2014).

Some retention literature focused on academic probation and suspension but it can be challenging to study students who departed the university, so many studies focused on the students who remain enrolled (Berkovitz & O'Quin, 2006). Further, much of the literature focused on ways to keep students enrolled. Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure asserted that academic and social integration led students to better retention outcomes. Academic integration included meeting the standards or guidelines (i.e. academic policies) of the university as well as normative integration, fitting into the culture of the university. Students who land on academic probation are not likely

integrated into the rules and norms of the university, a problem potentially exacerbated by a semester away from the institution if they are suspended. A key component to academic integration stemmed from relationships with faculty. Matteson et al. (2011) used a self-study approach about their expectations of students to promote academic justice and student retention, acknowledging the role faculty play in helping students to complete their degree. Harrison and Mathuews (2022) interviewed students about faculty behaviors in response to academic struggles, such as responding patiently to questions and presenting information in different ways, to illuminate the ways faculty can support student success. In addition, robust and proactive support from academic advisors can also lead to better retention outcomes for students on academic probation (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Kraft-Terry & Kau, 2019; Vander Schee, 2007).

Research about the readmission process shows that students who are readmitted following academic suspension may continue to struggle. In many cases, their grades prior to suspension predicted success upon their return. Hall and Gahn (1994) examined six predictors of academic success after suspension and reentry and found only GPA factors were significant. Cogan (2011) also examined readmitted students to predict success and found that the quality point status at dismissal accounted for 19.2% of the variance. McDermott (2008) found about 20% of students who were reinstated following suspension were academically successful. Given this low rate of success, according to what criteria should university administrators base decisions for readmission following suspension? Using a qualitative approach, Bowlus (2023) looked at the reinstatement process through a narrative theory lens following academic suspension to determine better criteria for guidance and support. Adding interviews and student-written narratives to the readmission process gives administrators more context for students' academic records and allows them to understand students' experiences and support their needs.

Our study augments prior research on academic suspensions using a content analysis approach. Rather than evaluating readmission petitions that follow the term of suspension, we examine appeals written by suspended students immediately after they are notified of their suspension status. At the site location, the committee that assesses immediate re-enrollment requests in suspension appeals share similar expectations, and even personnel, with the committee that considers readmission applications. Since the existing literature shows that grade trends can be suggestive of future outcomes, and that more context is needed for making re-enrollment decisions following suspen-

sion, our study of suspension appeals adds valuable insight into criteria for evaluating petitions for readmission.

Theoretical Framework

When reviewing suspension appeals, we placed emphasis on agency because university administrators need assurance beyond the evidence of a suspended student's academic record that they possess the wherewithal to achieve success if allowed to return. We framed our study in the context of agency according to Bratman (2000) because it captured the nuances of motivation and planning. Bratman asserts that humans are "purposive agents" capable of being reflective and forming plans that evolve over time (Bratman, 2000). These core elements—reflectiveness, planfulness, and temporally extended agency—form a complex system wherein our ability to have plans with coherent and coordinated action (planfulness) over an extended period of time (temporarily extended agency) depends on our ability to assess and endorse motivations that support those plans (reflectiveness) (Bratman, 2000). Thus, Bratman's philosophy serves as a crucial framework for evaluating the persuasiveness of appeals.

Bratman's approach is not often applied to higher education research. Anderson (2022) used Bratman (2000) in a book that describes scaffolding and autonomy. Philosophers like Franklin-Hall (2024) drew from this framework in an article about dementia, capacity, and values. Topcu and Hirst (2019) also draw from Bratman's (2000) concept of perceived agency in their study of people remembering events over time. We believe this framework sheds new light on the experiences of college students who are called to express themselves through the academic appeals process. The integration of academic philosophy with university policy offers a valuable lens through which we can examine the expectations, goals, and effectiveness of these policies as reflected in student responses to academic suspension.

Methods

This case study took place at the largest undergraduate college (enrollment ~1,500 students) within a four-year university in the Southern United States that enrolls about 4,500 students per year, including more than 3,000 full-time undergraduate students. The student population includes 66% women and 34% men, with more than half of all students being Students of Color. Nearly 30% of undergraduate students are the first in their families to attend college and more than 90 percent of the undergraduate student body relies on federal financial

aid and university scholarships. Each semester, about ten percent of the undergraduate students are on academic probation and about nine percent are academically suspended.

Participants

We conducted a content analysis of 81 students' appeals letters submitted in response to their academic suspension notification between fall 2021 and fall 2023 (Bowen, 2009). This sample of participants comes from the larger group of suspended students, of whom we do not have demographic data. Not every suspended student chose to file an appeal. Table 1 includes the demographic background of participants.

Letters were redacted for privacy, removing identifying information in compliance with our IRB approval. The university suspension letter offered guidance to students who wished to appeal. Students were advised to reflect on the circumstances that led to their poor grades and to include plans for future success. Though students were expected to focus on academic struggles, they were not discouraged from discussing a disability or other mental and physical health issue in their appeals. They were, however, advised to consult appropriate campus officers before making a disclosure in order to make sure their interests were protected.

Table 1
Characteristics of Participants (N=81)

Characteristic	*n*	*%*
Gender		
Female	64	79
Male	17	21
Pell Grant recipient		
Yes	51	63
No	30	37
First Generation Status		
Continuing Generation	33	41
First Generation in College	47	58
Not sure	1	1
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	41	51
Latino/a/x, Chicano/a/x, Hispanic	24	30
Not reported	1	1
Multiple Races	6	7
Pacific Islander	1	1
White	8	10

Data Analysis

Our coding process was a mix of deductive and inductive approaches (Saldaña, 2016). We analyzed the content of students' academic appeals letters through Bratman's (2000) agency framework. This framework, coupled with our shared experiences working with students through academic difficulties, informed our first round of coding in Dedoose, a platform for mixed methods research. Our preliminary start codes were: agency, belonging, COVID-19, expectations, fear, finances, health, motivation, policy, and resource. We independently coded 10 appeals letters, and then discussed our codes and observations. These conversations led to a more-refined second round of coding with an emphasis on agency, responsibility, and identity and ensured inter-reliability in our analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012; Terry & Hayfield, 2020). These conversations also included reflections on our experiences as administrators who work with students in academic difficulty and recovery and how our positionalities may have shaped our interpretation of the data (Terry & Hayfield, 2020).

Limitations and Delimitations

One of the strengths of our data source was that it was not limited by interactions with students because students wrote independently in response to the suspension letter. This study is delimited to the students who opted to appeal their academic suspension status between fall 2021 and fall 2023. Without demographic information for the larger population of suspended students, we are limited in our observations about the racial diversity of this sample, which is significantly less White than the university population.

Further, the significant growth of artificial intelligence (AI) in writing emerged in 2023-2024, and could have been a factor in the appeals, especially from 2023. Our reading of the appeals letters, however, found that most of them seemed too personal to be derived entirely from AI tools. Going forward, however, we anticipate AI will be a significant factor in appeals letters.

Findings

A fully-developed sense of agency includes reflectiveness and planning. Appeals that include reflections on past academic experiences, outcomes, and motivations that are closely aligned with future plans for improvement were more compelling because they conveyed agency in this sense. In general, the appeals captured some basic elements

of agency. Some elements, however, were missing, while others were muted. It was rare for suspended students to represent their agency fully. Students sometimes demonstrated a basic sense of agency, such as explicitly acknowledging their responsibility for poor outcomes and reflecting on the causes of their academic struggles. However, many students ignored the advice in the suspension letters, focusing selectively on their difficulties. They often described highly personal mental, physical, or emotional turmoil that interfered with their progress in school. But these appeals typically overlooked how these struggles directly influenced their academic performances. Our study found that when students offered non-academic explanations of the challenges they faced they generally avoided addressing classroom behaviors or other academic difficulties that led to poor outcomes. Recovery plans in these appeals were ineffective, failing to address academic issues directly or to link academic recovery with the non-academic challenges mentioned. Consequently, there was a significant misalignment between students' reflections on past difficulties and their strategies for future success. In other words, students' disjointed appeals suggested they were not fully aware of their capabilities as agents, as they failed to connect their reflections with their plans for recovery.

Interestingly, students reflected a vague sense of themselves as temporally extended agents, but this was disconnected from the immediate situation they faced. More specifically, students tended to convey a commitment to long-term aspirations for being successful college graduates, even though those outcomes were not supported by their actual academic performances or plans for improvement. Students' appeals often pleaded for continued enrollment simply because suspension would disrupt their desired graduation timeline and post-graduation goals. They frequently described a semester away from college as a threat to their entrenched identities as students rather than seeing it as an opportunity for further reflection and planning that could assist them with fully realizing these identities. Thus derailed, these appeals did not present convincing evidence of a fully-developed sense of agency wherein reflectiveness and planfulness in a temporarily extended framework came together in a coherent or convincing whole.

Theme One: Students Present Sense of Agency through Responsibility

When students who appealed their suspensions expressed a sense of responsibility for their academic outcomes they captured a basic element of agency. Students are expected to meet specific requirements

to remain in good standing. Accepting responsibility for meeting, or failing to meet, those expectations reflects agency because it shows that students understand their actions or abstentions contributed directly to their outcomes; i.e., good standing, probation, or suspension. While relatively few students in our study expressed a full awareness of expectations for academic performance outlined in university policies, even though these were included in the letters and emails they received, they gestured in that direction. Anthony, for example, framed his appeal in terms of failing to meet the term GPA policy for students on academic probation, saying "I am writing to appeal my academic suspension regarding my failure to meet the academic standards of my Fall semester and reaching a minimum GPA of 2.3." His awareness of the policy and his ownership of the failure to meet its conditions showed that Anthony recognized himself as an agent whose choices and associated actions merited the outcome he experienced.

It was more common for students in our study to acknowledge their responsibility for their academic outcomes even though they did not identify specific ways their actions had failed to meet university standards. Christopher began his letter by thanking the university for the opportunity to appeal his suspension and stated that "I accept full responsibility for the actions and steps I took that ultimately resulted in my current standing with the university." Claire also expressed gratitude "for the opportunity to explain my challenges and detail my plan to address them." Students gestured toward their responsibility for outcomes by acknowledging shortcomings in their strategies for navigating coursework. Dylan, for example, took responsibility for his failures in a particular class, stating "This [situation] was entirely my fault due to lack of communication, on my end, between myself and the professor."

Students also addressed their sense of agency in efforts they had made, or planned to make, to hold themselves accountable. Describing the ways that she had come to recognize her regrettable tendencies, Grayson observed, first, that "in past semesters I had not taken enough initiative to hold myself accountable for turning in assignments on time, regularly attending class, and communicating with professors when I needed help." But, having reassessed her inclinations and their collective impact on her performance, she noted potential for ongoing improvement. She observed, "This semester was an overall achievement for me as it was the first semester where I had not failed any classes and had maintained my commitment to staying within the C average across my classes as discussed with my advisor. I was able to improve academically this semester through constant communication with my professors, completing assignments before they were due,

making connections in class with peers to help hold myself accountable. If I am able to continue…I plan to continue implementing these techniques into my overall effort in school as well as hold myself accountable to the new goals I have listed [in the plan] below."

Despite this evidence of agency, students tended to be selective in how they conveyed a sense of their agency. They often framed their reflections in ways that avoided responsibility—that is, being held accountable—for their academic performances and outcomes. While many students remained silent on their responsibility or accountability, others denied responsibility or accountability for their situations outright. Although it did not happen often in the appeals reviewed for this study, students who denied responsibility for academic outcomes usually claimed that course instructors were instead at fault for creating uncertain or unfavorable conditions for their success. Dylan found fault in his failure to communicate with one professor but, for another class in which he earned a poor grade, he denied fault. The professor of the class, he explained, "had some major health issues" and Dylan felt the course expectations were not sufficiently clear or consistent enough for him to succeed. Other students over-shared mental health or personal situations beyond their control that often led the reader conflicted about what was or was not in their control, and what would be reasonable support going forward.

Theme Two: Students Link Their Identities To Their Academic Plans and Timelines

Suspension appeals encourage students to think of themselves in terms of temporally extended agency. That is, students are invited to consider themselves agents who persist over time, linking together prior plans with future actions in a continuum that often reflects and reinforces elements of their identities. In these cases, suspension from college, even if only for a limited time (a semester), is interpreted as a direct threat to their identities as students and the associated plans and projects connected with this identity in time. We found signs of these challenges to their sense of temporally extended agency and identity, first, in the frequency of student remarks that their academic performance, and therefore their suspension, is inconsistent with *the kind of student I am*. Students acknowledged that the suspension appeals grant them an opportunity to explain the inconsistencies between how they see themselves and how university administrators do. One student wrote that, "my grades are not indicative of the student that I have the potential to be. As such, I would like to explain the

extenuating circumstances that have led to my subpar performance." The same student then tied the sense of his own potential in the future to the sense of himself as a student he had developed before he entered college. "When I first started classes," he reflected, "I thought I would be able to continue my academic pursuits the same way that I had done previously in high school. I did not realize the toll my [challenging personal situation] took on my mental health, and my ability to perform academically. My grades did not reflect the student that I knew I was." Another student, Ava, opined in similar terms about how the low GPA and academic suspension "does not determine who I am as a student." She insisted that she was a "very eager individual who wants to show that words do not define what your future holds" and who "will grow not only as a student but as a person defeating any obstacles in front of me." In this sense, the appeal is an attempt to reaffirm the student's identity and to show that they possess the wherewithal – the agency, not only to step back and reflect on their performance and how their motivations and actions had changed in the face of new and unexpected challenges but also to adjust their plans for success in the future and thereby reestablish a consistent, coherent identity.

Students also talked about their threatened identities by denying that academic suspension would accomplish what administrators said it should. The suspension notification assures students that "This time away is intended for you to reflect on your academic goals and re-evaluate your academic performance." In other words, suspension can be understood as an additional opportunity for students to develop remedies to the issues often addressed in the appeals but in preparation for potential readmission to the university after the term of suspension. Students did not always see it that way. Dylan put his concerns succinctly, saying although he was aware that suspension is intended to "allow students to take time off to reevaluate their academic endeavors and to come back with a renewed sense of purpose," he did not think the logic applied to him. Rather, he argued that "all an academic suspension will do for me is to derail my career plan" and would "completely change the direction of my life" in an undesirable way.

We get a sense from these cases that a student's sense of identity could be closely aligned with a specific, time-bound understanding of their temporally extended agency (i.e. not only that being a student was a project unfolding over time with a beginning, middle, and end but that it had to happen within a certain timeframe). Even though there is no clear *a priori* rationale for believing that suspension from college for a single semester would necessarily result in a delayed graduation timeline, students sometimes talked as though it would. Emma stated matter-of-factly that "I will

not be able to complete my degree on time," though she retained her commitment to someday "finish school and fulfill all my requirements."

Other students suggested an understanding of suspension as a near-permanent exclusion from college, tantamount to an end of their education and, with it, their plans and identities as students. This false belief manifested in many instances of what can best be described as "begging" or "pleading" for permission to return for another chance. Isabella, who said she understood the consequences of her actions but did not want "this semester to portray how serious I am as a student or how serious[ly] I take my academics," ended her appeal by saying "I beg you to please consider my appeal and allow me to continue my enrollment." While Andrew acknowledged that he had been afforded previous opportunities "time after time" to restore his good academic standing, he nevertheless asked for "one last shot to make it right." Mia similarly hoped for another chance to prove her potential, which she believed she was close to meeting, saying "I know I am inches away from being the student I can be."

Theme Three: Students Fail To Fully Realize Their Potential As Agents

We can see that some students presented a relatively clear sense of their agency in the terms we have defined. They accepted some responsibility for their outcomes, reassessed their motivations and actions following a period of reflection, and highlighted an understanding of themselves as students who possessed temporally extended agency connoting long term plans and projects. But many students failed to realize their potential, that is, they did not present themselves as fully capable of aligning the various elements of agency we have discussed. They did not present themselves as adults who could coordinate or organize their desires, motivations, and actions in a coherent way over time in order to achieve a reasonably well-defined goal; i.e. returning to good academic standing. The common denominator was an inability to bring the reflection and planning pieces together in a convincing or compelling way.

This need not be surprising. "One might be," as Bratman (2000) notes, "a nonreflective but planning agent. It may also seem that one might be reflective about one's motivation at any one time and yet not be a planner who projects her agency over time." When evaluating suspension appeals, however, college officials can reasonably expect evidence of close, if not *perfect*, alignment between reflection and planning; that is, substantial evidence that students have the wherewithal to recognize and engage important features of their own agency.

Many students explained their experiences, often in great detail. The narratives can range from late high school through the transition to college, but many focused on the latest semester of enrollment. Most of these narratives were accompanied by a plan for academic recovery. They were prompted by the suspension letters that an appeal, should they choose to submit one, would be more compelling if both parts - reflection and plan - were included. But the mere presence of reflection, on the one hand, and of some planning, on the other hand, was not always enough to give the full confidence that students understood themselves as agents capable of reflecting on their past decisions and making plans for future action consistent with those reflections. Without better alignment between past experiences and future expectations for improvement appeals were not convincing.

Students discussed circumstances that were beyond their direct control that contributed to poor academic outcomes. But without reflecting on the actual impact of these circumstances on their academics, that is, on the parts of their experience that led to their probation and suspension, narratives of their experience were too difficult to credit against the plans being offered. When a student discloses the mental health impact of the unexpected loss of a close relative, or anxieties induced by difficult family or romantic relationships, but gives no indication of how these events manifested in measurable classroom performance (i.e. grades), readers are left to much room to wonder whether the recovery plans offered could actually work.

Discussion of Findings

Notifying students of academic suspension, or that an appeal of suspension has been denied, is not glamorous work. Suspension often represents an unexpected and undesired interruption of a student's prior plans and therefore threatens their identity. It can be stressful, and uncomfortable. But remaining enrolled under the conditions that resulted in probation and then suspension does not serve the best interests of students earning a degree, even if they do not agree. Suspension can be necessary, especially when failing grades and unearned hours do not lead to graduation and run counter to federal financial aid standards (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Appeals are useful because they add a more nuanced and individualized aspect to the portrait of students than grades alone can provide. As Bowlus (2023) observed in the context of student readmission appeals following academic suspensions,

> No particular student academic record data had been found to predict

> student success upon return from suspension, thus [these] data alone are unhelpful in making reinstatement decisions. Supplementation with narrative through written appeals and student interviews provides decision-makers with a detailed story of what was happening in the student's life and the impact on their success. (p. 57)

Without objective measures for reliably determining whether students who have had consecutive semesters of poor academic performance are capable of returning to good academic standing, we rely on the narratives they offer that can contextualize student records, reflect on the meaning of experience, and offer realistic solutions to the difficulties these students have faced.

As we have seen, though, the introduction of narrative reflection on past events is not enough by itself. Though an appeal contextualizes and explains the student record, its persuasiveness depends on how convincingly that happens. Reflection must invite a change in future action, that is, it must be accompanied by a plan. As Bowlus (2023) noted, students tell compelling stories but they must address the academic challenges that led to low grades. In other words, administrators are looking for evidence of agency, i.e. reasonable assurance that students have the capacity to reflect and plan.

Implications

Academic suspension and appeals cause stress for students and university administrators. They also interfere with retention and graduation goals. A deeper understanding of the ways college students show agency (or not) and how they link their identities to their enrollment allows us to draw implications for practitioners and for future research. Knowing more about the reasons why students struggle, how they reflect on these difficulties, and whether they see themselves as capable of making changes can inform support structures for better retention and completion.

First, providing clear guidelines for an appeals letter helps students understand the task and whether or not their situation actually warrants an exception (Bowlus, 2023). This research also can help college officials who evaluate appeals to develop criteria for reinstatement, such as through evidence of agency. Students are capable not only of reflecting meaningfully on their past motivations and experiences but also whether they can organize future actions in a coherent way based on those reflections may meet the reinstatement criteria. Clear communication about how narratives influence decision-making in the appeals process limits unnecessary efforts and can lower

stress levels of trying to understand an unknown or confusing criterion. When instructions are unclear, students often imagine more rigid or difficult guidelines (Rainey & Taylor, forthcoming). The timing of communicating this information is key. Students coming into college need to understand these criteria *before* they are in difficulty, rather than learning the policy because they were in violation of it.

Second, based on our students' reactions to seeing time away as a threat to their identity or ideal graduation timeline, there are opportunities to present time away from school in a more positive light. This is especially necessary because it is difficult, as a reader, to believe that continued enrollment is a reasonable solution to some of the personal narratives presented. Perhaps students who are suspended could be connected with career resources for work or volunteer experiences. In some cases, suspended students who are readmitted often benefit from a break from school to determine their priorities and gain a broader life perspective. Administrators could share narratives or videos from students who have spent time away to help students see the potential benefits from a brief pause in their studies. More could be done to help students see themselves as agents capable of reflecting on their goals, motivations, and experiences and taking the time to formulate a plan that supports their adjustments over time. Acting with a sense of agency leads to a student understanding what they can control and to take purposeful action, skills that undoubtedly will lead to better academic and social integration and success in college (Tinto, 1975, 2012).

Our review of the data also found students frequently mentioned very personal matters—from health diagnoses to roommate conflicts to challenging family dynamics. They used mental health and disability terms without being clear if the issue was a clinical diagnosis from a medical professional or a self-diagnosis. Their penchant for sharing so much non-academic background about themselves made it challenging to believe that continuous enrollment in school was a reasonable solution. Building extensive support, including during the term of suspension, seems essential to their potential reenrollment success.

There also are areas for future research to explore. There is an emerging body of literature about the ways students make sense of, socialize, and engage as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Kinze, 2023; Rainey et al., under review; Velez et al., 2023). Given the pandemic's lingering effects on academic preparation and social skills, future research could examine the intersection of academic suspensions throughout and following the pandemic. This would be especially interesting to examine because many institutions paused academic suspensions and moved to pass/fail grading at the height of the pandemic (Chan, 2022).

It would also be helpful for future researchers to extend this study to see what happens to the students who are readmitted, especially since prior research found limited success (McDermott, 2008). It would be interesting to follow students who reenroll elsewhere, especially as different degree pathways (i.e., online, competency-based) have emerged in the higher education landscape.

Conclusion

This study uniquely contributes to the literature about students affected by academic suspension and reenrollment. Our qualitative content analysis approach to students' appeals letters offers a distinct and nuanced view of 81 college students who wanted to continue to study despite their continued academic difficulties. We found students showed some elements of agency, selectively taking responsibility for their actions (like not attending class or focusing on work). Students' appeals were often grounded in their deep desire to complete school on their timeline, often resorting to begging for another chance to demonstrate the kind of student they can be, rather than who they are on paper. Most importantly, this study yielded a more nuanced understanding of this stressful, pivotal moment in the college completion journey.

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