

Typical Notification Letters Allow Worries and Shame, Lead to Withdrawal

Typical notification letters allow students to worry, “Am I viewed negatively by my school?” and “Does probation mean I don’t belong, or I can’t succeed?” This happens because most of these letters:

- Do not explicitly and fully communicate administrators’ positive intentions for probation
- Do not directly acknowledge the specific kinds of challenges that lead many students to struggle in college, challenges probation is designed to help students address
- Use language that inadvertently makes students feel marginalized, judged, or misunderstood

For many students, these **worries impede academic recovery**. Feeling ashamed undermines motivation and can lead students to try to hide the fact they are on probation, which prevents them from seeking out the very campus resources that will get them back on track, like attending a tutoring session or speaking with an advisor or a professor.

“Being on probation sucked. For some time after getting the letter, I felt that I didn’t belong. I had already felt that way coming in, but the letter seemed to confirm that... I wanted to drop out.”

“Psychologically Attuned” Letters Reduce Shame and Sustain Engagement

When you place students on probation, it is hard to communicate clearly in ways that tell students what probation is and why they are being placed on it without making them feel ashamed. That is why we have spent three years developing an approach to writing “**psychologically attuned**” notification letters. The goal is to provide clear, positive answers to the critical questions on students’ minds.⁷

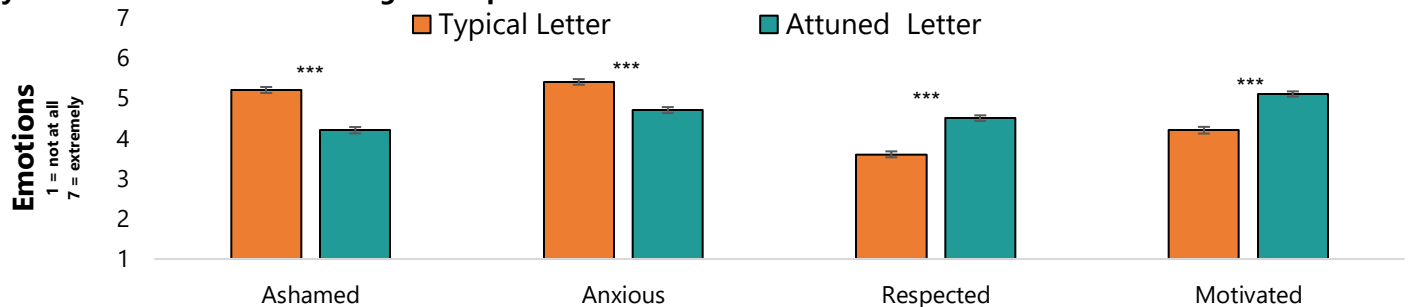
What is a psychologically attuned probation notification letter?

An attuned letter directly addresses the psychological worries on students’ minds, using four **Core Principles**:

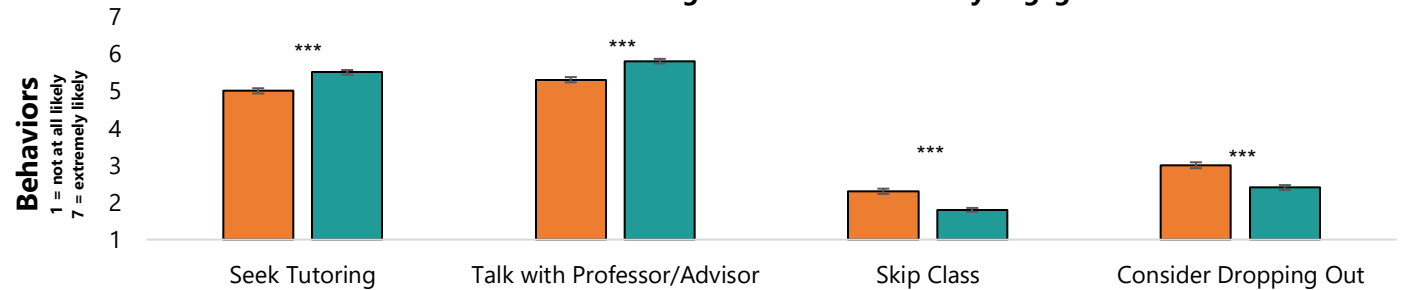
1. Frame probation as a process of learning and growth—not a label
2. Communicate that it is not uncommon for students to experience difficulties in college
3. Acknowledge a variety of specific non-pejorative reasons for academic difficulty
4. Offer hope for returning to good standing

It includes a few well-chosen stories from prior students who describe their own experience on probation in positive, growth-oriented ways.

Compared with typical probation notification letters, attuned letters decrease students’ feelings of shame and anxiety and increase students’ feelings of respect and motivation.⁸



Attuned letters increase students’ intentions to take advantage of resources and stay engaged.⁸



Academic Outcomes

An experiment at one university found that an attuned letter increased students’ likelihood of reaching out to an academic advisor soon after placement on probation ($z=1.85, p=0.06$) and still being enrolled a year later ($z=2.08, p=0.04$).⁷ However, in similar experiments at six other universities, attuned letters were seen more positively by students but did not translate to academic gains. We are still learning when, in what contexts, and for whom the psychological concerns addressed by attuned letters can lead to academic benefits.

The College Transition Collaborative

The College Transition Collaborative brings together pioneering social scientists, education researchers, and practitioners to create learning environments that produce more equitable higher education outcomes. We aim to help all students feel valued, respected, and like they can excel. probation@collegetransitioncollaborative.org

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