

The Student Experience: Relationships with Faculty and Future Academic Risk (WISHES)

Introduction and Methodology

The Wellbeing Improvement Survey for Higher Education Settings (WISHES) has been administered to the Texas A&M University student body in College Station since the 2021-2022 academic year. Texas A&M University surveyed the student body to better understand students' overall well-being, intermediate outcomes, educational outcomes, and student experiences that influence wellbeing. The survey covered topics such as overall health, psychological distress, suffering or struggling, flourishing, belonging at Texas A&M, resilience, binge drinking, health and academic risks, engagement in extracurricular activities, having a friend, mentor, or professor who makes them excited about learning and cares for them. The WISHES survey is administered in October, November, February, March, and April of each academic year. In the 2021-2022 academic year, the survey was also administered in September to students living on campus. However, the March and April surveys scheduled for spring 2023 were not administered. Since the 2021-2022 academic year, 20,360 students responded to at least one question, yielding an overall response rate of 12%.

This report focuses on how relationships with faculty—specifically, having a professor who cares—predicts future academic risk among students who have taken the survey in multiple years ($n = 1051$). The first time a student took the survey is referred to as Year 1, regardless of whether that was in 2021-22 or 2022-23; responses from the following year are referred to as Year 2. The amount of time between year 1 and year 2 varies depending on which month students took the survey in during those years, but they are always consecutive academic years. Students who responded “Yes, definitely” to the survey item “There is at least one professor at Texas A&M who cares about me as a person” were classified as having a professor who cared about them; those who responded “No” or “Yes, somewhat” were not. First-generation status was determined by student records. Students were classified as being at academic risk if they scored one standard deviation below the mean or lower with their mean score on two 7-point Likert scale items: “This

semester, I'm confident that I can do an excellent job on my assignments and tests," and "Considering the difficulty of my courses, my instructors, and my skills, I think I will do well in my classes this semester." Undergraduate and graduate student responses were included in all analyses.

Odds of Experiencing Academic Risk in Year 2 Based on Having a Professor Who Cares in Year 1

A logistic regression was used to determine the extent to which having a professor who cared in year 1 predicted academic risk in year 2. As can be seen in Table 1 below, in general, students who did not have a professor who cared about them in year 1 had significantly increased odds of experiencing self-reported academic risk the following academic year ($b = -0.47, SE = .20, z = -2.66, p = .020$). This increase was significantly greater for first-generation students, who saw a 600% increase in odds of academic risk while their non-first-generation peers saw only a 61% increase in odds of academic risk (see Table 1; $b = -1.47, SE = .65, z = -2.03, p = .024$). Full model results can be found in Table 2 on the following page.

	n	Not at Academic Risk	At Academic Risk	Odds of Experiencing Academic Risk*	Increase in Odds**
First-Gen	226	81%	19%	0.23	-
No prof cared	160	75%	25%	0.33	600%
Prof cared	66	95%	5%	0.05	-
Non-FG	825	79%	21%	0.26	-
No prof cared	587	77%	23%	0.30	61%
Prof cared	238	84%	16%	0.18	-
Grand Total	1051	80%	20%	0.26	-

Table 1. The odds of experiencing academic risk.

*Odds are calculated as the percentage of students in a given row at academic risk divided by the percentage not at academic risk.

**Increase in odds is the odds of experiencing academic risk for students with no professor who cared about them divided by the odds of experiencing academic risk for students who had a professor who cared about them. This represents the increase in odds of experiencing academic risk compared to having had a professor who cared.

Coefficient	Estimate (in log odds)	Estimate (in odds)	Std. Error	z Value	p Value
Intercept	-1.22	0.30	0.10	-12.39	< .001
Professor Cares (vs. No Professor Cares)	-0.47	0.62	0.20	-2.32	0.020
First-Gen (vs. Non-First-Gen)	0.12	1.13	0.21	0.58	0.656
Professor Cares (vs. No Professor Cares) * First-Gen (vs. Non-First Gen)	-1.47	0.23	0.65	-2.26	0.024

Table 2. Logistic regression results.

Conclusion

Students who reported having a professor who cared about them the first year they took the survey were significantly less likely to be experiencing academic risk the following academic year. This was especially true of first-generation students, who saw their odds of experiencing academic risk in year 2 drop to near-zero if they had a professor who cared about them in year 1. Additional analyses not reported here indicate that students at academic risk had significantly lower GPAs and 1-year persistence rates. Simply put, students having a professor who cares about them meaningfully reduced their odds of being at academic risk not just in the present, but the following academic year too. This in turn predicted better GPA and persistence into the following academic year, and these effects were similar or greater in magnitude for first-generation students compared to their non-first-generation peers. Finally, [out of all the students who took the WISHES survey](#), only 32% reported having a professor who cares about them. This implies that there may be a disconnect between professors and students, where many professors care about their students, but students do not perceive their professors as caring about them. Remedying this issue may yield measurable improvements to GPA and persistence among all students and especially among first-generation students.

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