

Developing Basic Skills through a Learning Center Summer Program

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Overview

There is a growing concern that increasing numbers of college students do not write well, read well, or reason well. Documented trends in the decline of standardized test scores (NCES, 1981) substantiate these concerns and highlight the importance of the role of college learning centers.

In general, the role of college learning centers is twofold:

1. To provide academic assistance which includes writing programs; reading and study skills programs; tutorials and supplemental instruction; and basic skills development.
2. To provide affective support to nurture academic perseverance. This type of support may include: offering encouragement when students confront a difficult task; helping students to realize that they're not the only ones finding college difficult; providing role models in the form of tutors, instructors, or peer counselors whom students can emulate; and helping students understand what to expect from examinations or other requirements.

The support provided by college learning centers is, in many cases, sufficient to help the student persist when he or she might otherwise give up.

College learning centers traditionally have made their services available to academically underprepared students at the beginning of the freshman year. The transition to college, however, is a particularly crucial period for students who are less well prepared academically than their peers; it involves many different adjustments to college life. This is as true of

colleges with a highly selective admissions policies as it is for those with liberal admissions policies. Cornell University has introduced a Summer Developmental Program to help students develop basic academic skills. At the same time we begin the nurturing process that we hope will lead to persistence.

Rationale for Summer Programs

The Cornell University Pre-Freshmen Summer Program provides students with their first extended contact with Learning Skills Center staff and begins a bonding process that can last throughout the academic year. Summer Program students know the Learning Skills Center staff and the extent to which they can be helpful. Summer Program students also provide an excellent informal referral service for other students who may need learning center services but, not having been involved in the Summer Program, are less familiar with the learning center.

The Summer Program has several objectives:

1. To provide an extended orientation to college life and requirements
2. To evaluate student strengths and weaknesses
3. To develop sound study habits
4. To improve basic skills (in content areas: mathematics, chemistry, biology)
5. To improve attitudes and expectations about college work

The Summer Program coincides with the university's regular summer session and lasts for six weeks. During the program, students live in a university dormitory and take one regular university credit course and two developmental courses.

Program Structure

Cornell's Committee on Special Educational Projects has sponsored a Summer Program since 1973. The current model combining regular university coursework with developmental courses was established in 1977, when 80 students participated. Having grown each year since 1977, the Summer Program now serves, each summer, up to 150 students who represent all seven of Cornell's

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undergraduate colleges. Selection for participation is based on a combination of scores on standardized tests, the quality of the high school experience, and the difficulty of the curriculum to be pursued in college. In addition, special-admit Higher Educational Opportunity Program students (HEOP—"academically and economically disadvantaged") are required to attend the Summer Program. Such students account for about 35 of the 150 participants.

The Pre-Freshmen Summer Program is funded almost entirely from university general-purpose allocations. For HEOP students, the New York State Education Department provides a reimbursement of roughly 22 percent of the total cost of attendance. The Summer Program is free to participants and includes tuition and fees, books, room and board, a stipend for incidentals, and financial aid replacement for any expected summer earnings. Regular tuition is paid for academic credit courses, while instructors for developmental courses and the peer counseling staff are hired directly by the Learning Skills Center. Such strong institutional commitment and widespread support among the faculty allow for a comprehensive, yet diverse program that encourages student growth and development.

The Summer Program is administered by the Learning Skills Center, with courses offered through the university Summer Session office. The program is linked administratively by four units having interrelated, but distinctly different responsibilities: (1) The Administrative Unit is responsible for overall planning and coordination, including staffing, enrollment, and budget matters. (2) The Academic Unit is concerned with all matters related to courses (credit and developmental), including registration, diagnostic testing, and syllabi. (3) The Counseling and Advising Unit selects and trains peer counselors, arranges personal growth workshops, and provides general nonacademic supervision of students. (4) The Student Development Unit is responsible for enrichment activities, such as faculty "rap" sessions, sociocultural activities, field trips, and recreation.

Design of a Developmental Summer Program

Academic Program

The academic programs are geared to each college and reflect the coursework required by a given college. The regular university course is selected from college graduation requirements, while the developmental courses focus on the first-term course schedule. For example, students in Engineering would take a regular university course in computer science, while their developmental courses would be math (calculus) and chemistry. Students in Arts and Sciences would take a regular university course in English and developmental

courses in social science and biology.

All summer program students take a course in study skills. The schedules are rigorous, and grades appear on the student's official transcript. The university courses are taught by professors, while the developmental courses are taught by learning center staff.

Sociocultural Programs

A wide-ranging series of sociocultural programs are offered as an integral part of the Summer Program. These activities include workshops, tours, field trips, faculty seminars, dances, and even athletic tournaments. These activities are designed to acquaint students with the full range of university resources and facilities, while also providing appropriate outlets for energy and breaks from the routine of the academic workload. They also serve to discourage students from getting homesick or going home on weekends.

Personal Growth Programs

Special workshops are offered to aid students in personal growth. These include workshops on money management (most of our participants are on financial aid and may be handling rather large sums of money on their own for the first time); sexuality; alcohol and drug abuse; interpersonal relations; and assertiveness.

Faculty Interaction

Summer Program courses are taught by regular university faculty, by regular Learning Skills Center lecturers, and by staff hired especially for the summer. Regular faculty and Learning Skills Center lecturers are involved in the diagnostic testing program and course placement. Special guest lectures are given by prominent faculty who are on campus in the summer. Also, weekly "rap" sessions are offered—either in the dining hall or in the dorm—during which a guest faculty member might discuss his specialty, talk about career paths, or just answer questions on topics of interest. Summer Program instructors often hold special review sessions on student turf, that is, in the dorm in the evening. Instructors are also encouraged to participate in sociocultural and recreational activities. Many instructors attend picnics or participate in events like the "Fun Olympics," a full Saturday of games, races (track or swimming), and general friendly competition with students and staff from other summer programs at nearby colleges. This kind of interaction affords students the opportunity to see faculty in both academic and nonacademic settings. It also contributes to a sense of belonging and friendship, and demonstrates the human dimension of university life.

Impact of Summer Program

Almost all students successfully complete the Summer Program. Occasionally a behavioral problem may result in a dismissal, but this is rare. *Ninety percent* of the participants pass their regular university course; *99%* pass their developmental courses. The developmental courses are concerned with basic skills development in the content areas, but a more precise index of basic skills improvement is derived by comparing scores on pre-tests in the content areas with scores on parallel post-tests. Such a comparison shows that *100%* of students showed an improvement in test score; the average improvement was 46.5 percentage points. Such improvement suggests that Summer Program students experienced substantial gains in basic skills knowledge over the six-week program.

Similarly, students' attitudes about the summer experience and their expectations about the fall were positive. In summary, students' attitudes and expectations about college develop positively over the summer, showing that the program encourages students about the fall semester and their ability to cope with it.

As a final measure of the impact of the Summer Program, it can be noted that those who participated in the Summer Program were substantially less prepared for college in comparison to their counterparts in terms of standardized college entrance examination scores. Summer Program participants had substantially lower test scores than did a sample of their cohorts, matched on sex, ethnicity, and high school rank. Yet a comparison of first-year grade point averages shows essentially no difference between those who participated in the summer program and those who did not (Summer Program students earned a mean first-year GPA of 2.45, while nonparticipants earned a mean GPA of 2.55, n.s.). One might have expected students who were substantially less prepared for college than others to perform less well, but that was not the case for our Summer Program participants.

Discussion

Participation in a summer program can be a positive experience that results in substantial improvement in basic skills and provides a sound foundation for college work in the regular academic year. Participants in summer programs can develop useful insights about what is expected in college, while enhancing their confidence to succeed. Changing demographics argue for an increasing role for college learning centers through the 1980s, and summer programs can be added to the range of services that learning centers provide. Indeed, much of what we hope to accomplish in learning centers should take place in the summer so as to better prepare students for the fall semester.

References

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