

*Underprepared students' academic skills levels vary from campus to campus, depending on entrance requirements and academic standards. However, all these students face the difficult task of entering the mainstream of their college community.*

## *Learning Center Services for Underprepared Students*

*William Collins  
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The term *nontraditional* is used in academic circles to describe college and university undergraduates who are dissimilar to the generations of students who applied for and were accepted for full matriculation in the past. It has been applied to the academically underprepared, minority students, students for whom English is a second language, older students, and students who have distinctive physical or learning disabilities. During the 1970s, in particular, it was a code word for the radically different and a popular euphemism for disadvantaged minority students. As the decade progressed, colleges and universities recruited more and more of these nontraditional students, partly out of genuine interest and concern, partly in response to social and political pressures, partly to offset a continuing decline in undergraduate enrollment. Today, there are so many nontraditional students on campus that the term has lost much of its original meaning.

Amid the variety of students to whom this term has been applied, academically underprepared students have always received the most attention and notoriety. Many, though certainly not all, have racial or ethnic minority backgrounds. They are from inner-city high schools, and have

grown up in blighted and racially segregated neighborhoods. Their poor high school preparation and academic skills normally would have left them unqualified for college-level work. However, federal and state legislation of the 1960s and 1970s, itself a reflection of changing societal attitudes, provided funding for a wide range of compensatory programs and services. Open admissions, new recruitment policies, and special admit programs were introduced. These have been largely responsible for making colleges and universities accessible to such students.

Access, however, implies far more than a decision to admit underprepared students. Their deficient academic backgrounds made it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for them to cope with the academic and personal demands that were placed on them. During the first great influx of these students in the late 1960s and early 1970s, postsecondary institutions hastily devised developmental programs that were supposed to bring the members of this group up to the preparation levels of regularly admitted students. Years of inadequate training were to be corrected within two or three semesters. Not unexpectedly, these efforts were not uniformly successful. Often, they foundered, either because they were poorly conceived in the first place or because students were bewildered and frustrated. Since they were being asked to do so much in such a short time, it is not difficult to understand why so many reacted with suspicion and hostility.

The crisis atmosphere that accompanied the advent of these underprepared students to college campuses has subsided, due partially to a general decline in student militancy and a return to an atmosphere reminiscent of the 1950s, partially to steps taken by the academic community itself. In any case, the scope of the problem is much more clearly perceived in 1982 than it was in 1972. Although comprehensive solutions have yet to be found, it is still true that colleges and universities have now developed considerable expertise in ways of helping the underprepared student. Specially funded programs, development courses, tutoring, academic and personal counseling services—all now contribute to integration of these students into the mainstream of college life. Gradually, with the proliferation of support services and programs, there emerged a new campus institution that incorporated the diverse and sometimes diffuse compensatory efforts into a rationalized, administratively sound organization. Referred to on many campuses as the learning center, this new component has come to bear a good deal of the responsibility for enabling underprepared students to succeed as college undergraduates.

Learning centers are now as much a part of campus life as the underprepared students whom they serve. Interest in their operations and effect on underprepared student retention is widespread. Five years ago,

Sullivan (1977) listed and categorized the student services of more than 1,400 learning centers; more have appeared since then. Literature on this subject includes surveys of learning center structures (Cross, 1971, 1976) and descriptions of the various design options (Karwin, 1973; Maxwell, 1978; Peterson, 1975). Enright and Kerstiens (1980) reviewed the evolution of learning centers for the second *New Developments for College Learning Assistance* sourcebook. Professional organizations, local and national conferences, institutes, and workshops add to this atmosphere of intense pedagogical effort. A small but potentially significant movement is under way to advance opportunities for graduate training and degrees to learning center personnel. All these encouraging developments undoubtedly will enhance the academic credibility of the learning center as a viable campus institution and be reflected in more effective ways of assisting the underprepared student population.

The learning center response to these students will vary from one college or university to another. The variations will stem both from institutional goals, academic policies, and requirements and from students' levels of academic skills preparation. Thus, no one operational mode is universally applicable. The different approaches of two institutions have been selected for purposes of illustration in this chapter: the Learning Skills Center at Cornell University and its counterpart at the Brooklyn Center of Long Island University. In both examples, it will be noted that the centers have adapted services, methodologies, and materials to the needs of their undergraduate student population and adapted both to the context and academic confines of the standards and admissions policies of their institutions.

### **Learning Centers in Two Different Settings**

**Cornell University.** Cornell University, founded in 1865 by Ezra Cornell, is a private, nonsectarian university. It is also the land-grant institution of New York state and a member of the Ivy League. As such, the student body is highly selective. Using Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores as an index of student academic proficiency, the typical Cornellian places more than 300 points higher than the national average.

In 1964, Cornell set up a Committee on Special Educational Projects (COSEP), with a mission to recruit, assist in admissions, and provide academic, social, and psychological support for minority and disadvantaged students. Over the years, they have been recruited from all parts of the United States, including Puerto Rico; almost half are and have been residents of New York state, and a large percentage are from the New York City metropolitan area. COSEP students' SAT scores average

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about 150 points lower than those of typical Cornellians. Although it would seem that, as a group, they are better prepared than most students in the nation, at Cornell, their entry-level capabilities and the highly competitive orientation of the other students on campus do not augur well for academic success, particularly in the freshman year.

Other factors also militate against a successful freshman year for COSEP students. They lacked the informal networks that many Cornellians take for granted—tips from alumni relatives, access to fraternity and sorority exam files, acquaintance with a sympathetic faculty member who is known to the family, to mention only a few. Further, although formal and informal counseling were accessible to the general student population, COSEP students found these contacts difficult to arrange and frequently disappointing in their results. A recent campus-based study of minority student advisement revealed that, while advisers felt that they were attuned to the special needs and circumstances of minority students, many students found that advisers were insensitive to their particular circumstances and either unable or unwilling to discuss their personal problems. The unfortunate consequence was that minority students were likely to seek out the relatively few black or Hispanic advisers for supplemental counseling.

Recognizing that many COSEP students would be unable to cope for any length of time without some form of academic assistance, Cornell established a Learning Skills Center to provide them with academic support and personal counseling. Center services are geared to the first two years, since Cornell expects COSEP students to become independent learners by the time they reach the junior year. Little is available to upperclassmen, beyond Learning Skills Center facilities and technical resources. In keeping with its original mandate, the Center concentrates its services on the task of academic foundation building. Its major goal is to give COSEP students the skills and confidence necessary to compete successfully in the classroom.

Some COSEP students make their first contact with the Learning Skills Center through its prefreshman summer program. About one third of each entering COSEP class is required to participate in six weeks of preparatory and introductory courses. These students usually have the weakest high school records; their SAT scores, on the average, are 100 points below those of students who do not attend the summer program. Each student is programmed for a regular credit-bearing university course. He also is required to take a study skills course and two developmental courses, all without credit. The noncredit courses focus on improving skills required for key freshman courses, including biology, chemistry, and mathematics. COSEP students have frequent occasions to

meet with advisers who give them much-needed information about university life and about what will be expected of them during the freshman year. Pre- and posttesting in academic areas suggests that these introductory six weeks can be pivotal. Over the years, studies of COSEP students' first-year grades have indicated that, although the summer program students were not as strong as their COSEP peers, their grade point averages after two semesters at Cornell were comparable.

It has already been mentioned that Learning Skills Center activities are almost entirely devoted to helping COSEP students to complete the freshman and sophomore years successfully. During the first year, students are offered a variety of supplemental courses that complement particular core courses in the sciences. Lecturers who hold joint appointments in the Learning Skills Center and in sponsoring academic departments hold special sessions on a weekly basis and review work covered in the classroom. They encourage COSEP students to ask questions. Ordinarily, COSEP students are reluctant to do so. Lecturers also give practice quizzes so that students can monitor their potential in a given course. Their general accessibility in the classroom, combined with their frequent office hours, help COSEP students to compensate for the inequalities in skills levels between themselves and the general student population. Periodic evaluations of Center effectiveness have shown that COSEP students who actively and conscientiously participate in the supplemental instruction program achieve a letter grade improvement in the course or courses involved.

Learning Skills Center services for sophomores are primarily in the form of tutorials. Unlike supplemental instruction courses, which accommodate fifty students or more, tutoring involves single individuals or small groups no larger than five. As sophomores, COSEP students are supposed to be proficient in problem-solving techniques. They generally know what to expect from their professors as regards curricula and examinations. Yet, difficulties arise in understanding key concepts and relating them to other principles in a course. Tutoring sessions, therefore, seek to bridge this gap through explanation, question-and-answer exercises, and demonstration. In the final analysis, tutorials make a tangible difference only to students who are not doing well in a particular course. COSEP students who are performing on a satisfactory level or better would gain little from them. Regular assessments have shown that more than 75 percent of the COSEP students who sign up for tutorials receive a grade of C or better.

A program for reading and study skills improvement has been developed by Learning Skills Center personnel to help COSEP students improve their reading comprehension and speed and to develop effective

study habits. Accordingly, the Center sponsors a semesterlong credit-bearing reading improvement course and offers minicourses on study skills improvement. A reading laboratory is available for anyone who would like to do independent work in reading skills. Interestingly, with the passage of years, non-COSEP Cornellians have discovered this service. At present, they account for almost half of the students served by this component of the Learning Skills Center.

**Long Island University/Brooklyn Center.** Founded a little more than a half century ago, the Brooklyn Center of Long Island University (LIU) is the parent campus of a multicampus private university. Its student body, composed almost exclusively of first-generation collegians, is a microcosm of the New York City metropolitan area population. A significant percentage of the Center's undergraduates can be categorized as minority—black, Hispanic, Asian—but even these terms give no hint of the great diversity of backgrounds and national origins within each group. Nonminority students, mostly of Italian, Irish, or Jewish ancestry, can usually refer to grandparents who were born in the “old country”; quite a few can claim more recent ties to a European past.

During the early 1970s, the Brooklyn Center of Long Island University was directly affected by the open admissions policy mandated for the City University of New York. It began to admit students who had not been adequately prepared for college-level work. Unlike Cornell, where underprepared students, in the aggregate, had SAT scores well above the national average, LIU Brooklyn students who fell into this category had combined scores below 800, and some with scores below 600 were admitted to a special developmental skills program. A disturbingly large number of entering freshmen had not taken the SAT and were arriving with the General Equivalency Diploma as their sole credential. Perhaps 60 percent were coming directly from the senior year of high school. The others were returning to the educational pursuits after several years away from school.

While the older students were no better prepared than their eighteen- or nineteen-year-old peers, they were more mature and highly directed toward career objectives. Also, they tended to be less resistant to the idea of developmental, compensatory work, although they were more insistent about understanding the rationale for courses and class assignments. The young students, most of whom were graduates of New York City high schools, often appeared immature and without motivation, although many had exaggerated and unrealistic career goals. The transition between high school and college, which lasted only a matter of months, caused a rude shock. Most students probably understood that their preparation for college work had been inadequate, at best; yet, they were not always “ready” for developmental courses and programs. For



these students, the strength of their determination was severely tested at their first contact with college. They found the task of catching up a burden in itself.

Brooklyn Center officials were hard put to devise services and programs to accommodate these underprepared students, but by 1974 they had established an Office of Special Academic Services to coordinate all special academic and counseling programs. In a succession of events very similar to those at Cornell, LIU Brooklyn quickly organized a learning center through which many of the compensatory academic support services could be channeled. The overriding concern at both institutions was essentially the same: to concentrate on the basic skills during the two lower division years so that underprepared students would become able to hold their own in the classroom. It is widely perceived at LIU Brooklyn that many students who now complete their baccalaureate degree requirements would fail to do so without these support services and programs. Internal program reviews and federal and state evaluation reports confirm this assessment.

The principal services available to underprepared students at LIU Brooklyn's learning center are individual and small-group tutoring, walk-in workshops, and basic skills laboratories. Assistance is offered for most lower division courses. Not unexpectedly, the greatest demand is for freshman and sophomore English and science courses. Most English tutoring is done on an individual basis, whereas science and mathematics sessions are held for groups of two or three. Walk-in workshops are scheduled, some on a regular biweekly basis, for subjects in very heavy demand. Study skills and math anxiety workshops are also very popular. Over the years, periodic evaluations of the learning center's tutorial services have revealed that students who attend sessions regularly for a period of six weeks or more will improve their course grade by at least one letter grade and sometimes more. Basic skills laboratories have been designed to accompany developmental skills courses in English composition, reading comprehension, and mathematics. The courses are taught on the standard model of lecture and classroom discussion, and there are frequent one-hour examinations. In contrast, the laboratories are completely individualized. Thus, basic skills development is available in two complementary instructional situations.

In a manner consistent with LIU Brooklyn policy, the learning center has become an integral part of a much larger, comprehensive approach to the education of underprepared students. The spectrum of services and programs, of which the learning center is but a part, includes federal and state-funded counseling for underprepared disadvantaged minority students and two university-sponsored developmental skills and

freshman guidance programs for underprepared students. All these programs have been very effective in such problem areas as financial aid, lack of motivation, poor self-image, and realistic career goals. Their professional counselors are well aware that deprived family backgrounds and dismal high school environments are at the root of many difficulties that their students face. Learning center staff members, working closely with these program counselors, concentrate on building the academic skills of this student group. However, they are not unaware of the external influences that adversely affect these students and make it difficult for them to cope with the demands of the academic world.

The coordination and cooperation that exist between counselors and learning center staff members have been achieved in a variety of ways. Learning center personnel meet regularly with special program directors to discuss delivery of services and anticipated needs. An academic resources committee composed of learning center staff, special program counselors, and library professionals is responsible for selection of materials, evaluation of students' progress in reading and mathematics, integration of audiovisual aids into developmental courses and skills laboratories, and extension of learning center services to community groups outside the university. Faculty members are encouraged to refer their students to the learning center for work on English grammar, term paper assignments, and research projects. They may, and do, request workshops on topics and areas in which their students are having difficulty. In a way that complements the efforts of the learning center staff, a number of faculty members have volunteered for retraining in order to teach developmental skills courses in reading and mathematics. Their awareness of learning center-related issues has been enormously helpful in broadening support among the LIU Brooklyn community for its academic and counseling supportive services.

### **Areas of Common Concern**

The two learning centers described in this chapter have clearly been successful in helping underprepared students to improve their academic performance levels and to become better adjusted to the competitive atmosphere of the college campus. It has already been noted that many of these students need more than regular academic assistance. Students with serious psychological problems, personal problems, or both must be referred to appropriate campus counseling services. If such services do not exist or if on-campus counseling resources are limited, learning center staff can use listings of community services to make outside referrals. Still, the learning center can be very effective in helping students to adjust to

campus life and understand its competitive nature. The following paragraphs discuss some adjustment problems that these students have and some ideas that the authors have for possible solutions.

***Student Anxiety.*** Underprepared students usually approach the learning center in an anxious frame of mind. Having never had much success in school, they wonder if this is not the final step toward yet another failure. Such questions as “Why am I doing this?” and “Do I really belong here?” are uppermost in their minds. They think that their peers in the classroom are smarter, better attuned to the course curriculum, and far more likely to earn better grades. In this frame of mind, it is little wonder that they sometimes appear negative and suspicious. If learning center staff members are sensitive to these students’ hesitancy and sense of inadequacy they can do much to help them to overcome their anxieties.

First encounters—with admissions officers and other campus officials, with classroom instructors, and with learning center staff—can directly affect how a student reacts to the entire university setting. Students should find the learning center a comfortable place to be. If they find all sorts of other students on hand as they look around, they will be reassured. Learning center personnel should be able to see through the suspicious attitudes, moroseness, insistent demands for services, and complaints about instructors, courses, and university offices and decide how much can be ascribed to the student’s feeling of inadequacy and anxiety and how much to fact. One very frequent source of anxiety arises from a student’s very real fear of a particular subject. Perhaps poor teaching methods had been used in the elementary school, or the student had been humiliated in class, or a teacher had made distinctions between how girls and boys should be taught. These are only a few of the reasons why an undergraduate can feel anxious when exposed to the subject in college. Mathematics is a major source of difficulty, but students can have emotional blocks about any subject. Since underprepared students are especially prone to anxiety problems, learning center personnel should be trained, through orientation workshops and exposure to the literature, to help their students to cope with and overcome their fears.

One very effective way of putting underprepared students at ease, which requires little expenditure of energy and in which the students themselves will make the necessary associations, is to have individuals on the learning center staff who can serve as role models. The typical university community has few faculty members or administrators of racial or ethnic minority background. The learning center should be more representative, both because it is relatively new on campus and can reflect the changed social attitudes of the last two decades and because underpre-

pared students will not have positive feelings about their situation if all learning center staff members are from one group and all the students are from another. If these considerations are taken into account, students will find role models where they will, among the center's tutors, instructors, or administrative personnel. They will try to internalize many of the traits they see displayed, since possession of the traits obviously has paid off for others.

***Student Expectations.*** Underprepared students often aspire to professions about which they know very little. Their expectations may be completely discordant with the realities of course requirements, choices of departmental majors, and the many other hurdles that must be cleared before the long-sought professional status has been attained. Experience with underprepared student populations at Cornell and the Brooklyn Center underscores this. These students at once underestimate the competitive environment of the college campus and overestimate their chances of success in competitive academic situations. Students who have such a picture suffer a rude awakening almost from their very first day on campus.

Students' first need is to know what to expect in any given course—what kinds of examinations will be given, what additional assignments will be made, how the instructor intends to determine the final grade. All too often, the first examination of the semester is also the first glimpse that students have of what will be required as the semester progresses. A low grade on the first test will demoralize some students to the point where they lose all confidence. Learning centers are well suited to helping such students adjust their expectations about college work so that there will be more congruence between their expectations and experiences. Approaches that work include practice quizzes, supplementary courses, additional laboratory work, and skills workshops attuned to specific courses. Any one of them, or a combination thereof, will help students to evaluate their situation in a more realistic framework. Although the process may still be painful, some of the agony, demoralization, and frustration will be gone.

***Student Responsibility.*** Many underprepared students, particularly those from inner-city schools, arrive on campus with little or no ability to deal with structured situations. Unwittingly, it would seem, they have opted to compete in one of the most demanding and tightly structured environments possible. Their previous secondary school background or their absence from school for some years makes it unlikely that they will succeed unless they understand clearly that certain kinds of responsible behavior will be required of them. Most exhibit one or more of the following characteristics: unawareness of the need to be punctual

for class, inconsistency in class attendance, inability to take usable lecture notes, poor textbook reading techniques. These inadequacies must be remedied before students can be expected to show significant academic progress. Somehow, the entire spectrum of campus agencies, programs, and services has to cooperate in helping students to change these behavioral patterns. An individual special admit program, counseling service, or learning center will not be able to do it alone.

Learning centers can foster student responsibility. Indeed, that should be considered one of their primary responsibilities. At LIU Brooklyn, for instance, where many of the underprepared students fit the profile just drawn, the learning center's major tutorial services offering takes the form of contract tutoring. Prior to the first meeting, each student signs a contract, which is countersigned by the tutor. Thereafter, the student is obliged to attend regularly, until he formally indicates that he no longer wishes assistance. This contract system reflects a conscious effort to instill a greater sense of responsibility in students who use the service. While the system is not so formal as to deter students, it does encourage them to keep appointments. Students do not relate to their tutors as if they were instructors, but they certainly do not relate to them as fellow students who are being met for social reasons. Students arrive for sessions, sign in, and proceed to assigned carrels to work with their appointed tutors. Most have reacted positively to the professional atmosphere of the tutoring center, and their ability to keep appointments has improved markedly over the years. On the whole, tutoring is taken very seriously. The "rap session" occurs infrequently, and on the rare occasions when tutors have encouraged such informality, the students invariably have complained that they were not being helped.

***Independent Learning.*** Perhaps the most valuable effect that the learning center can have is to improve the underprepared student's attitude toward learning in the college or university setting. Learning is an active process; it involves practice and experience. An anxious student who lacks family or academic role models or a student with inappropriate expectations about college is apt to be a passive learner—one who tries to absorb information without participating actively in its organization and synthesis. Passive learning is incompatible with success because it leads to poor study habits and a general inability to prepare for assignments and examinations. It also fosters dependence. And, herein lies a serious threat to the effectiveness of learning centers. Utmost care must be taken to avoid a crisis intervention atmosphere so that students will not think of the learning center only as the place to go in an emergency. The greatest service that these centers can perform for underprepared students is to make them better informed about and more involved in the actual learn-

ing process. Only then will they be independent learners, capable of mastering what is expected of them as they move from one course to another.

## Conclusions

Academic readiness has become a national issue. Popular magazines and daily newspapers routinely carry articles in which the general decline in student skills is pointed to as the sign of a deeply-rooted educational malaise. The academic skills courses and compensatory services that were once reserved for the underprepared students discussed in this chapter are no longer the exclusive preserve of the students. This development, however, should offer little comfort to those who have been working with underprepared students. The numbers of underprepared students are increasing, while secondary school preparation remains as inadequate as ever. Socioeconomic pressures continue to weigh heavily on students' families and neighborhoods. As their ranks swell, the problem of providing effective assistance will be exacerbated. Resources are already stretched dangerously thin, and generous infusions of supplementary funds are unlikely to materialize in the immediate future. Indeed, the 1980s may be the decade in which Americans will decide whether to support the liberal traditions of the previous two decades or to eliminate the funding on which so many students and academic support programs have depended.

In this changing academic and fiscal environment, the learning center is being asked to extend its services to all students who need academic assistance. At the same time, it cannot reduce or dilute its services to underprepared students. But, as its services become more inclusive and as new student groups begin to use its service, the learning center will find itself more highly regarded within the academic community. In the past, there has been a general reluctance to view its activities as anything other than remedial in nature. If learning center administrators can seize the initiative and adapt their support services to the needs of all students, the chances for complete integration of the learning center into the structure of higher education will increase immeasurably. Continued administrative support and survival as a campus institution both seem to hinge directly on this outreach to the entire student body. Predictably, underprepared students will regard learning centers in a more positive way. No longer will they need to ask "What am I doing here?" They will have only to look around to discover that they are not alone.

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