

ADDRESSING DIVERSE AUDIENCES: TUTORING THE UNDERPREPARED STUDENT

Helen Baril
Quinnipiac College
Hamden, Connecticut

Given the fact that many of today's college students are determined to be underprepared by many standards, it is often the lot of the learning center tutors and personnel to work with these students and remedy problem areas. Whether the student is in a small private institution or a large state system, the definition of the student remains constant. He or she has just about maintained a C average in high school and has a total of about 750-800 on the SAT. The high school transcript indicates the appropriate number of units of math, English, sciences, etc., but the expectations of high schools vary so much from location to location that there seems to be no correlation between grades from one district to another. Thus, usually some sort of placement exam given by the college or university places this student in developmental English or developmental math or both.

Since the number of such developmental course sections is on the increase in most institutions throughout the U.S., tutoring centers are seeing more and more students who are ill-prepared, lacking definitive study skills, and many times lacking direction and maturity. The success or failure of many of these students is directly related to the effectiveness and availability of tutorial services.

The major factor influencing the success of the tutorial center with underprepared students is availability. A tutoring center needs to be available, well-funded and have excellent tutors. Because underprepared students generally cling to their old high school ways, they seldom seek out assistance even when it is available. If they desire to seek assistance and use resources, they would probably have been more successful in high school.

Simply getting this category of student into the center is a great accomplishment. They are wary of the services, do not usually understand the role of the tutor, and remember only their parents' threats of making them go to a tutor if they failed a course, this being a fate worse than death.

Once the underprepared student actually comes to the center, he or she usually has a very difficult time focusing on the problem at hand. It is generally a very good idea for the tutor to actually address very little course-specific work during the first session. It is much more important to gain the student's confidence and attempt to define the role of the tutor in terms which the student can understand, be very specific regarding what a tutoring session can and cannot do, and generally make the student comfortable in the surroundings. In many cases, the attitude of the institution in general toward the center can play a major role in the success of such a session. If it is the "place to go," the task of the tutor at this point is made much easier. The student has made the initial move to handle a very foreign atmosphere, but having done that, the student is reassured by the fact that peers are also attending sessions.

Once the tutor has built some base of rapport with the student and progresses to content-specific work, he or she cannot leave anything to chance or assume that certain skills are in place on the part of the student. The tutor really has to become a watchdog in terms of the study skills of the student. If the student did not learn study skills in high school, it is highly unlikely that he or she is going to learn them at the college level in the classroom setting. The tutor should pay attention to the note-taking skills, reading skills, and the amount of work being done by the student. Many underprepared students are so overwhelmed that they do not even know where to start. If the tutor can help with organizing work schedules, outlining a plan of attack, and setting priorities for tasks, this could be even

more helpful than an hour spent working on something like reviewing the quadratic formula. Once these skills are in place for the student, the material seems easier, the professors are less daunting, and anxiety levels are reduced.

Many underprepared students have a very difficult time realizing that there is a world of difference between performing a task or doing a problem and understanding that task or problem. The tutor can be helpful in this regard by being overly patient with the student, explaining tasks or problems in a multitude of ways, and requiring that the student verbalize the process. When the student can explain it, he or she has then illustrated full understanding and is more apt to remember it.

In summary, there are a number of approaches that a tutor can utilize to best serve the needs of the underprepared student.

1. The tutor should be sensitive to the generally heightened anxiety of the student.
2. The tutor should consider the fact that study skills are of the utmost importance to the underprepared student. Spending time in this area will reap great rewards for the student as well as make the tutor's task easier.
3. The tutor should be aware of the fact that most underprepared students have a great deal of difficulty focusing on the task. The tutor should attempt to utilize all of his or her best skills in this area.
4. The tutor should continually check the written work, notes, and homework of the student for clarity, accuracy, and completeness.
5. The tutor should attempt to highlight understanding of concepts throughout all of their sessions since it is the case that many underprepared students tend to try to memorize rather than to learn.