

QUESTION #1: WHAT IS A LEARNING ASSISTANCE CENTER?

A conversation with Gwyn Enright

When I was Director of the Learning Resource Center at California State University Northridge in the mid-1980's, I was exceptionally proud of what I did and consequently I talked a lot about the learning center, even to those who were not colleagues. "Wha da ya mean, learning center? Isn't the whole school s'posed to be a learning center!" heckled a scientist-friend. Ironically, I think a learning assistance center can be defined partially by its philosophical *separation* from the institution.

The learning assistance center is the place students can go for help when, for whatever reason, they are not functioning well in the context of the established institution. At the 1994 Annual Winter Institute for Learning Center Professionals in Tucson, Arizona, I said that 25 years of reading, writing and thinking about learning centers led me to conclude that the fundamental feature of the learning center definition was a *sense of place*.

What an intriguing idea! How did this "sense of place" come to be?

When Frank Christ defined Learning Assistance Center in 1971, he began his definition by saying first that the LAC was "a place." When I borrowed his definition to have a yardstick for tracing the origins of the Learning Assistance Center in 1975, I wrote that the LAC was "a place concerned with learning within and without, functioning primarily to enable students to learn more in less time with greater ease and confidence; offering tutorial help, study aids in the content areas and referrals to

other helping agencies; serving as a testing ground for innovative machines, materials, and programs and acting as campus ombudsman." I believed territory or real estate central to the learning assistance center concept. I said the place and its ecology distinguishes the learning assistance center from the isolated reading improvement class, the exhortatory study skills seminar, the glad-handing summer orientation, and the one-shot tutorial session.

So, what does this mean to a student?

Because of who the learning assistance center client is—the student uncomfortable in the academy—he or she requires a place to go to for study skills advice, more information, alternative delivery modes, and answers that go beyond “the party line.” Because much of this student’s experience in school may be in classrooms and offices where he or she does not feel welcome, I thought it was important to

provide a refuge. And so in addition to orchestrating all possible resources to help this student succeed, serving as campus ombudsman is part of my LAC definition. Then I saw the learning assistance center as a place where the student could find scholastic and emotional support, a chair or sofa, and sometimes a cup of coffee.

What about now?

I am rethinking the need to have such a concrete definition of a learning assistance center. Frank Christ, in 1988, proposed a bare bones learning assistance center in which a trained professional can meet with a student or teacher and, using a telephone, an information data base, and a dependable referral system, offer help to improve learning. A virtual learning assistance center, existing only in

cyberspace, may be possible if all participants—tutors, counselors, instructors and clients—understand and protect the main functions of a learning assistance center. The learning assistance center welcomes all learners, pulls together and organizes necessary resources—either in one spot or through referral and follow-up—and retains enough independence to address student issues fairly.

How can a learning assistance center be effective if it is independent from the institution?

Well, you’ve raised a non-trivial issue. Most learning assistance center professionals work conscientiously to integrate the center into the campus community—either through services that cut across departments, such as offering testing or make-up testing; programs that improve instruction on campus, such as faculty development workshops or special faculty consulting; or through locations that bring the

centers out from the back lot or up from the basement in order to be visible and convenient in the center of campus. I think these efforts are great and improve the learning assistance center. What I mean by “independence” or “separateness” is a philosophical stance in which the learner and his or her concerns come first.

Gwyn, is "learning assistance center" a generic name for these programs, and if so, how do I select a name for my center?

I don't think it matters. The local origin of the learning assistance center, the campus politics and the tastes of the center director dictate the title of the learning assistance center. Two colleagues and I surveyed all institutions of higher education in the United States in 1975, and we found Learning Assistance Centers mainly in student services at four-year institutions and Study Skills Centers or Reading and Learning Skills Centers mainly in academic departments such as English or Psychology at two-year institutions. We found Learning Resource Centers in the library. Since then, learning assistance centers have undergone much cross fertilization, and specific considerations of architecture, finance, program, personality, and politics at the college or university housing the learning assistance center have had more influence over naming the Center than any need for consistency in the professional literature! The learning assistance center I directed at San Diego City College was, and still is, called The Independent Learning Center because it was located in the library and had a resources emphasis. But the most important reason for the ILC title was that the learning assistance center at Mesa College, another col-

lege in our community college district, already had established a learning assistance center called The Independent Learning Center. Its director served on the committee establishing the new Center at City College and on the committee hiring me as the new director!

The multiplicity of names and the embedding of learning center functions within different structures can be confusing, especially to someone new to the field of learning assistance management. Look at Burn's diagram summarizing the "pure" components of a learning assistance center in her article in the *Proceedings of the Winter Institute for Learning Center Professionals*. You can also locate another helpful source in the *Proceedings* in Kerstiens', "A Taxonomy of Learning Support Services."

A favorite activity of veteran learning assistance center professionals, after budget, evaluation, staff, and program are under control, is to debate the differences between learning assistance centers, learning resource centers, and developmental education. Incidentally, not everyone agrees: the debate goes on.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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