

## QUESTION #6: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LAC WITH SPECIAL POPULATIONS?

*A conversation with Sylvia Mioduski*

The Learning Assistance Center's role is to be the one "safe" place on a campus where students can turn for help to fulfill their dream of going to college. For some, it is a dream that begins very young. For some, the dream is born in high school. And for some, the dream comes from someone else who sees the potential and nurtures the possibilities. However it happens that individuals become college students, the reality is often unnerving. The student is in a new—dare I say "foreign"—environment responding to new sets of expectations for academic performance, personal growth, and social interaction. College is a culture that expects students to know what to do and how to do it with minimal guidance

and direction, a culture that perpetuates the myth many students believe: "I should be able to do this on my own."

We know the range of issues that impact a student's ability to successfully navigate the college experience: developing academic and intellectual competence; establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; developing personal identity; deciding on a career and lifestyle; maintaining personal health and wellness; and developing an integrated philosophy. As I said earlier, the LAC is frequently the one "safe" place on a campus where students can turn for help.

*Why do you think students see the LAC as such a "safe" resource?*

It is, in my opinion, the people who work in the LAC that make the difference. Students gravitate towards individuals who are willing to listen, assist, and provide quality referrals.

They look for resources that will help. They look for a place to belong that does not judge them for what they "should" know but do not.

On the other hand, many students believe they are prepared but, in fact, are not. They are not prepared for the level of commitment, the intensity of the reading and writing assignments, the need to learn to navigate a completely new system. Many are living on their own for the first time. First-generation college students do not have role models at home that have experienced the college environment.

Students with learning or physical disabilities have additional needs such as determining the physical accessibility of university buildings, finding notetakers, readers or signers, making arrangements for books on tape or extended time for testing. The LAC may be the designated department on a campus for these students or it may be the resource students turn to for referral.

*I understand the students' issues, but how does a Learning Assistance Center create the environment that attracts students?*

I'd like to respond to this question with an example. One of the greatest professional experiences I had was the opportunity to work with the Office of Minority Student Affairs, OMSA, at the University of Arizona. In the early 1980's, the university made the decision to support increasing recruitment and retention of ethnic minority and low-income students and established OMSA for this purpose. The Office was staffed with a team of outstanding professionals with a common vision: create a welcoming environment that would encourage students to enroll, persist, and graduate. This included developing a recruitment office, a tutoring program in math and science, expanding an already successful summer bridge program, and implementing a first year program.

As you can imagine, this was a labor-intensive endeavor. The team had a limited number of full-time staff and a minimal budget.

The decision was made to increase the staff by utilizing university undergraduate and graduate students as peer recruiters, peer counselors, and peer tutors and by turning to the academic departments for graduate teaching assistants for courses. In addition, there was a conscious decision to enhance the environment of OMSA by recruiting both student and professional staff who represented the students we wanted to recruit and retain.

Extensive use of peers ultimately resulted in a 10% increase in minority student enrollment. In addition, research conducted in 1993 by the Testing Office concluded that students who were involved in multiple programs sponsored by OMSA were retained at a rate 8% higher than a cohort who was not involved. This retention figure also supported the idea that community is created not just by one experience but through many experiences.

### *Are you suggesting that I look at certain things to create the right environment?*

Absolutely. Although my example described a learning assistance center for a specific population, there are specifics any LAC

must address. These include a focus on a quality process in staff recruitment, hiring, supervision, training, advocacy and involvement.

### *Would you talk some more about recruitment and hiring?*

Be clear about the criteria you set for the positions in the LAC. Market your positions as widely as possible and also target those populations represented in your LAC. Do you serve students with disabilities? Students from underrepresented populations? Students who are academically at-risk? New traditional students, age 25-30? Veterans? Whether you are recruiting professional staff, graduate students

or undergraduate peers, look for individuals who not only meet the criteria of the position but also serve as role models for your students. Also, make it a point to involve the faculty in assisting with the recruitment process. They see the students in their classes and are in a position to encourage applications from students who might not see themselves as potential candidates.

### *How important is staff supervision?*

Providing feedback to staff on a continuous basis is a requisite for a quality program. Regularly scheduled staff meetings provide the opportunity for updating training and for regular review of policies, procedures, and issues. I believe it is important that all staff be in-

involved in this opportunity whether they are faculty, professional, or peer staff. It is important for everyone to remember that they work for their department and have responsibilities to it.

### *How do you train your staff?*

Training involves more than an overview of services. Excellent training programs include detailed information, role-play, and the opportunity for trainees to provide feedback to let you know how well they understand the material. It provides a unique environment to

demonstrate what we know about how people learn through a variety of modalities. And it creates the opportunity to demonstrate effective utilization of today's technology that supports extending and expanding training beyond the traditional workday. Through listservs,

regular email, websites, tools such as WebBoard, training can continue on any given

day and at an hour that best suits the trainee.

*Earlier, you mentioned involvement. How do you get yourself and your staff involved with students?*

My staff and I use many approaches to demonstrating the LAC's interest in its students. We seem to be most successful by getting involved with students outside the LAC. We go to classrooms, the cafeteria, the residence halls, any place where students congre-

gate. Then, as we have gained the confidence of our students, they have extended invitations to us to participate in their class and club events both on and off campus. It is important that you make the time to be present at some of these occasions.

*Earlier, you also used the term, advocacy. What did you mean by that?*

Prepare yourself well to be an advocate for your students. For example, know the basics about your institutional policies and procedures that guide your students' progress toward their degree, the federal and state laws

that impact your students and the institution, like the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act, and the financial aid rules.

*Wait a minute! I've been hired to work in the LAC. I'm not the financial aid office and I'm not designated as the ADA compliance officer. You mean I really need to know all of these rules?*

I understand that it may seem overwhelming. But this is also why it is so important to know your institution's position about your students. There will be times when you may be the *only* advocate for your students. It may be that the institution considers *you* the expert

on some of these issues whether your LAC has direct responsibility or not. Remember the old adage: Knowledge is Power. If you know how to access information you are in a much stronger position to be a powerful advocate.

*Point well taken! With all that you've suggested, is there a preferred way to begin?*

Although every institution, every LAC, and every campus responsibility is different, consider how you can incorporate some of the ideas we discussed here. Whatever you do, trust your instinct in your work with your students. Talk to them. Seek their input. Listen to their message. Although their verbal com-

munication will give you information, it is often their unexpressed message that speaks volumes. Listening to students is the most important skill that LAC administrators and their staff bring to their work with students, especially with special campus populations.

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Martin, D. C. & Blanc, R. (1980). The learning center's role in retention: Integrating student support services with departmental instruction. *Journal of Developmental & Remedial Education*, (4), 2-4.

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Shaw, G. (1994). Multiple dimensions of academic support: One learning center's response to learning diversity. In R. Lemelin (Ed.), *Issues in access to higher education*. Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine, 14-16.

Xenakis, F. S. (1979). Learning assistance support system for disadvantaged nursing students. In G. Enright (Ed.), *Multicultural diversity and learning*. Twelfth annual proceedings of the Western College Reading Association, Los Angeles, 128-132.

*Sylvia Mioduski, a member of CRLA for most of her professional career, completed a two-year term as national treasurer in November 1998. Currently, she is the coordinating representative for Arizona CRLA. Sylvia is the director of the University Learning Center and the Freshman Year Center at the University of Arizona. Along with Frank Christ and Rick Sheets, she also co-directs the annual Winter Institute for Learning Assistance Directors and Practitioners.*