

## QUESTION #2:

# HOW CAN I DEVELOP MY PROFESSIONALISM IN LEARNING ASSISTANCE?

*A conversation with Karen Smith*

By reading extensively in the field and networking with other learning assistance center

professionals you will gain immeasurably in professional scholarship.

*But why should I consider this important?*

To answer that I must first explain why professional involvement is important for me. Our colleagues in higher education immerse themselves in organizations filled with individuals dedicated to the same field, discipline, or activity. They do this for the same reason that we, in learning assistance, seek association with others in learning assistance: in order to learn and become more knowledgeable, to become more skilled in our field, to share our knowledge and skills with others, and to meet colleagues in other colleges and universities. In higher education, professional involvement is considered crucial to advancement and recognition as a dedicated educator, and every new member of the collegiate community is

expected to become a member of the professional organization dedicated to his or her discipline or activity.

Without connections to other learning assistance professionals, we can easily become stagnant in our own colleges because we fail to stay current with developments and trends in the field. Isolation from other learning assistance professionals may not only bring about stagnation, but also does not allow others in the field the opportunity to know what we have developed and learned. In addition, our professional credibility is crucial to our image and reputation among our campus colleagues.

## *How should I begin to find other professionals in my field?*

First, join one of the major organizations for learning assistance professionals. The College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) is the oldest organization dedicated to learning assistance. For me, CRLA has provided the greatest professional growth and connections to peers in our field. In addition, the Midwest College Learning Center Association (MCLCA) and New York College Learning Skills Association (NYCLSA) are organizations focused on learning assistance. Although the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) is primarily concerned with developmental education, it also includes learning assistance centers in its areas of interest.

If your specialty is in reading education, mathematics or writing, there are other organizations that can help develop your knowl-

edge and skills. The International Reading Association (IRA), the College Reading Association (CRA), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and others can provide specialized connections in professional development.

Find out if your state has a local organization for learning assistance professionals. Many do, but if not, call your neighboring community colleges and universities to see if you can locate and connect to other professionals in learning assistance. You will gain much from developing a collegial network to call on for guidance and to answer questions as you develop your program.

## *Do you have specific recommendations for my reading?*

Definitely. A first reading for any new professional in learning assistance is *Improving Student Learning Skills, A New Edition* by Martha Maxwell (1997). Although originally published in 1979, it has been revised and, almost without exception, many learning assistance professionals have read and benefited from its strength.

Read the journals in the field. Read the articles on program description, program development and research on learning assistance in the *Journal of College Reading and Learning (JCRL)*, published by the College Reading and Learning Association. There are several jour-

nals, in addition to *JCRL*, which offer especially relevant information written and researched by your learning assistance colleagues. You will find these especially informative: *Learning Assistance Review* (MCLCA), *Journal of Developmental Education*, *New Directions for Learning Assistance* (Jossey-Bass Publishers), *Reading Research and Instruction* (CRA), *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* (NYCLSA).

Additional reading can broaden your knowledge about areas that impact on learning assistance and understanding college students and their needs. Casazza and Silverman's



*Learning Assistance and Developmental Education* (1996) and *Teaching Reading and Study Strategies at the College Level*, edited by Flippo and Caverly (1991), will offer you valuable information. In addition, learn about William Perry, Jr.'s theory on dualism in college learners and read Chickering's books about student development and student life issues, *Education and Identity* and the *Modern American College* (1990). Malcolm Knowles has written extensively on the adult learner and offers a model of human

development that differs greatly from that of Piaget. Among several outstanding authors and their work, Richard Paul's writing on critical thinking is pertinent to our work in learning assistance.

By the way, a Research and Scholar's Library for Learning Assistance Professionals is being developed at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. Its catalog will answer all your questions about important reading references.

### *If I need some stimulation, some new ideas, where can I find them?*

Join your colleagues in a national conference. Hear what they have learned and how they are serving students in other LACs. You will find plenty of stimulation and ideas when you network with your colleagues. They've been where you are in the novice's role, and they can help you navigate the collegial waters and miss some of the most treacherous areas. Especially important is that when you attend the conferences or workshops of your choice, you become involved in the organization. Volunteer for committees or workshops or assistance at registration or the exhibits. Let it be known that you are new and want to be actively involved. Then, by all means, follow through and make these new connections into long-term relationships.

I especially enjoy the collegiality and benefits of the CRLA conference, which is held every fall and features hour-long presentations and in-depth institutes on special interest topics, as well as keynote speakers, and a variety

of activities devoted to meeting the special interests of every participant. In addition, CRLA's state and regional associations hold conferences and meetings throughout the year and across the country. The MCLCA and NYCLSA conferences are held each fall, as well, and NADE holds conferences in the spring.

Attend the Winter Institute for Learning Assistance Professionals, held every January in Tucson. This institute is a dedicated and intensive week with a knowledgeable group of professionals and mentors in the field and a group of participants like you seeking growth and knowledge.

Watch for announcements about special symposia or conferences in the journals to which you subscribe. Some professional organizations and some colleges and universities arrange special conferences or sessions that may also be beneficial to you.

## What can I find about learning assistance centers on the Internet?

Much of the information about organizations and people in learning assistance is available on the Internet. First, subscribe to the listserv for professionals in learning assistance called LRNASST. Introduce yourself to the membership and lurk for awhile, learning about the issues of the day or the year, and then join in the discussions. Ask for assistance for your new program, and others will come to your aid immediately. You'll be amazed at the friends and colleagues who will make themselves available to you.

Next, visit the web site, Learning Support Centers in Higher Education, where you will find a one-stop web site that you can browse to become and stay current in your professional work. It contains a calendar of learning assistance-related events, a directory of associations, lists of resources for professional growth including institutions offering learning assistance related graduate degrees. This is your web site and it will profit from your feedback and input as to its content. Bookmark this URL at (<http://www.pvc.maricopa.edu/winterinstitute/>).

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

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