

QUESTION #14: HOW ARE LEARNING ASSISTANCE CENTERS STAFFED AND MANAGED?

A conversation with Rick Sheets

The staffing and management of a center depends upon many considerations. The typical role of the LAC administrator is to provide leadership and vision for the center. Ideally, the center administrator can also become a catalyst or change agent for the institution. Often the reality is that the administrator is placed in a position with many responsibilities and programs and too little staffing and inadequate

funding. Many of the new managers of centers have little management experience and often do not know how to delegate tasks. This reality often finds center administrators operating in a crisis management mode which can lead to burnout and stress related problems. Having the right learning assistance center staff can be a critical key for the success of the program.

What are some program management tools for an administrator wishing to avoid a management-by-crisis mode?

A process to systematically assess needs, establish goals, build teams, monitor progress, and evaluate effectiveness should be used. Three proven, effective, and comprehensive models include Management by Objective, MBO; Total Quality Management, TQM; and

Continuous Quality Improvement, CQI. Three newer models focusing on team-building and leadership include "Gung Ho Teams" by Ken Blanchard, "WOW Projects" by Tom Peters, and "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey.

New models are emerging all the time. Peters' past focus of a "Search for Excellence" has moved to his new model of "WOW Projects." Blanchard's past focus of a "One Minute Manager" now has moved to that of creating and maintaining a "Hi-Performance Team." If a management model is being initiated at your institution, a pilot that incorpo-

rates this method may have a better chance for support and funding. Any model that promotes excellence, quality, team building, and customer service can validate what is being done well and can be incorporated into a program. Any of these models can help managers to share the "load" of the center with their staff and enjoy the process of managing.

Is it important to keep records?

A good question. Thanks for asking. Programs with accurate statistics which document services, level of use, and successes have a stronger chance of receiving funds and support for continued existence or expansion. A well-documented history of service, use, and success can often stave off or minimize the inevitable budget cuts. I would suggest you:

1. give an annual report of the number of students served by the center and their demographics;

2. report any success outcomes, survey results and student evaluations;
3. report faculty and/or student perceptions of the center's programs;
4. identify anything else which will illustrate the success of the program such as student or faculty evaluations; and
5. keep statistics to show growth and long term trends.

So the three words to remember are document, Document, DOCUMENT!

How are most centers funded?

Initial funding for a learning assistance program is very often unique to the institution. Often initial funding is a pilot within a department or an institution. Frequently, a short-term internal or external grant is available to pilot a new program. It is important to establish a network for program support at all levels possible and to establish continuing funding sources to continue beyond the pilot stage.

Even when successful, programs have been abandoned when budget monies are tight. Statistics documenting successes, a cost-versus-benefit analysis, combined with stated support from the faculty, administration, program heads, and students can help new centers get established, survive institutional budget cuts, and even expand.

You have mentioned funding concerns several times. Do you have any suggestions for keeping operating costs down initially?

Yes, there are several things you may want to consider. The major cost in the past has been staffing. Providing current textbooks for tutor use has also been another major cost. Providing current technology such as microcomputers has recently become another major program cost. In addition to working to cut costs, you may also want to look at ways to generate income.

For staffing costs, look at hiring students where feasible. Many successful programs employ mainly students as their tutors and initial clerical staff. Check into cost-saving student options like college workstudy, graduate assistants, service learning projects, co-op projects, credit courses for education majors, internships, and independent projects. Identify and market a volunteerism component to your program for retirees, especially teachers or engineers, service organizations like YMCA, and campus clubs such as honors clubs. Faculty can also be a great and cost-effective resource if they use part of their required office hours or committee work in the learning assis-

tance center tutoring, working with tutors, and/or developing materials to support their students.

To provide current textbooks as a resource for tutors you can: 1) hire students who have taken the class recently and have a copy; 2) ask instructors who may have received a preview copy in addition to a desk copy and may be willing to loan it or give it to a center; 3) solicit a free desk or preview copy from your bookstore or the publisher by contacting them and letting them know your need; or 4) ask for textbook donations from students as they complete a class.

For computers or other technology, check with local vendors and suggest they loan you a computer with the company logo and contact information. Your institution may also have some partnership programs or grants which include providing computers. Ask to be included in funding considerations in new programs or partnerships so that your center can support their efforts as well.

What are some key strategies I could employ initially to build a strong staff?

After identifying the rationale, the mission of the learning assistance center, and the staffing needs of the program, it may be appropriate to discuss and develop an organizational chart of the staffing of the center. Many centers are funded from student services, academic

services, grant or other soft money, or within a specific department's budget. Reporting structure and budgets are not required to follow the same lines, though often they do. Generally speaking, the major source of funding identifies the reporting structure. Once staffing is

in place, begin establishing good communication, a common purpose, roles, and expectations with all staff. If you have options as to the reporting structure of the program, consider the best place for support and funding.

The center administrator should be reporting to a dean, president, or provost if possible. It is usually best to not have the center ultimately housed under a department or program if it is to serve students for the whole institution.

What kinds of qualifications should staff have?

Qualifications can be considered once the type of staff positions needed are determined and may differ depending on the expectations and responsibilities of the staffing positions selected and the amount of training provided. General qualification considerations include content expertise, which can be documented through degrees earned, coursework, grades, and work experience.

In the area of content expertise needed for positions in faculty and management, background should include degrees and should reflect experience at a credible level. Qualifications should include:

- ◇ prior experience in working with college students;
- ◇ knowledge of the academic and emotional skills needs of the student population to be served;
- ◇ ability to listen and communicate effectively with diverse student populations

and other staff in the center and in the institution and to deal with the students' affective and academic problems with patience and understanding and yet know when to be firm;

- ◇ understanding of the institution's policies and procedures;
- ◇ good group and one-to-one communication skills;
- ◇ analytical and problem-solving skills;
- ◇ flexibility in adapting skills development techniques to students' needs rather than forcing students into predetermined skills approach;
- ◇ open to learning about the skills development programs of other professionals in the center and other colleagues in the field and willing to integrate new information and programs and tailor them to the needs of students using the center; and
- ◇ commitment to the center with quality service to students.

Since a large portion of my staff will be tutors, do you have suggestions for recruitment?

It is difficult to find, recruit, and keep tutors because of the nature of the center. Many students feel overcommitted and unable to add another responsibility to their load. As they

complete their program, they are usually gone. Retirees generally offer longer and more sustained service as tutors, but there are some ways to recruit and retain students too.

Benefits for students as tutors which can be offered and marketed to recruit tutors include: letting tutors set their own flexible schedule; tutoring provides reinforcement of concepts learned; tutoring "harder" courses looks good on resumes; and tutors' supervisors would be available as references for a future job application. Also offer a little higher wage than the average student wage on your campus. Incorporating an internationally recognized tutor training certification program can help to establish program credibility with students and faculty and encourage students to become tutors.

Instructors can become your greatest re-

cruiters for tutors. Have them refer students they see as potential tutors to you. This provides "buy-in" for faculty, helps students to plan for the possibility of being tutors for the coming semester, builds credibility for your center, and gives you a pool of applicants as tutors. This works especially well for higher levels of sequenced courses or specialized program, or for a Supplemental Instruction program. Providing training for staff will enhance the consistency and quality of services provided. Certifying tutors as part of an internationally recognized program such as "International Tutor Certification Program" (ITCP) will greatly enhance the program's credibility with students, staff, and faculty.

In addition to tutors, what other staff might I need?

After deciding upon the program and services that will be included within the LAC, a next consideration should be to look at staff and options needed to support those programs. The staff may include faculty, managers, support staff, temporary workers, students, or volunteers.

Staff responsibilities may include teaching, coordinating programs or activities, supervising other staff or students, providing study skills workshops or seminars, advising, developing individualized learning packages or plans, tutoring, testing, proctoring, grading, evaluating programs, recordkeeping, reporting, giving tours, developing materials, demonstrat-

ing resources or software, promotion and public relations, monitoring budget or payroll, scheduling appointments, and may include clerical tasks such as word processing, typing, filing, checking out resources, and maintaining data bases and spreadsheets.

Initially more creative part-time staffing needs may be met by sharing staff with other departments; having faculty use LAC time as a committee assignment, as part of their required office hours, or as part of a teaching load; using internal or external grants to provide staff, or developing internships or credit-bearing experiences for students.

What other tips or suggestions do you have for managing an effective LAC?

Communication is probably the most critical key for managing an efficient and effective program. It can be a challenge to establish and maintain good communication because of the varied schedules and part-time nature of many of the tutors. A good start would be to establish regular staff meetings that can help to keep all staff abreast of changes and continuing expectations. Mailboxes or staff cubbies can provide a place for staff to regularly check in and receive information updates. Foster strong affiliations between full-time and part-time staff. Encourage special efforts to keep part-time staff informed. Electronic mail can be an easy and effective communication tool for center top-down, bottom-up, and peer discussions, announcements, and information updates. Ongoing anonymous written student evaluations of any staff, collected and returned frequently, can provide more honest communications to staff and supervisor as they provide insight into students' perceptions of staff performance. An open-door policy for any staff to talk with supervisors or center administrators can also keep communications flowing. Inviting faculty, institution administration, and/or students to center events such as pot luck, open

houses, and tours, can help open many levels of communication and increase positive atmosphere in the center.

Keep your campus administrators informed regularly. Include campus administrators and governing board members in center events like the Tutor Certification Award Ceremony. Each communication offers an opportunity to educate those involved as to the purpose, needs, and successes of your program. An example is that a note to your campus president of an increase in students served is something he/she could use in communications about campus services. Keep the reports brief, inviting, and informative.

I strongly believe in individual contacts. They can build teams, enhance understanding, and improve communications. Thus, I see each contact as time well spent and a crucial component for managing the LAC program. Finally, take care of yourself—"Slow down to the speed of life." Many LAC professionals burn out because they care about others at the expense of themselves. Take care of yourself, do your best, and enjoy the process!

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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Rick Sheets was born in Indiana and has lived in Phoenix, AZ since 1960. In 1971, he became an Eagle Scout. He has worked in the Maricopa Community Colleges since 1982; worked in Learning Assistance from 1982-1998; has taught mathematics, reading, study skills, BASIC computer programming, Computer Applications, and Web Page Design, and is currently the Director of the Microcomputer Commons Lab at Paradise Valley Community College (about 500 computers including an Open lab and 11 computer classrooms). Rick earned a certificate as a Developmental Education Specialist from Appalachian State University (Kellogg Institute, 1985), became 4MAT ATS certified in Learning Styles (Excel, 1987) and completed his Ed.D. in Curriculum & Instruction at Arizona State University in 1994 (Dissertation: "The Effects of Training and Experience on Adult Peer Tutors in Community Colleges," ASU, 1994). Rick has been awarded the League of Innovation's PVCC Innovator of the Year award twice. First, with Sally Rings in the development of a comprehensive tutor training program (which is CRLA ITCP certified) and second, as a team leader in the development of formal technology training options for campus staff and faculty. He has co-authored with Sally Krueger Rings two articles in the "Journal of Developmental Education" (content-related study skills and theoretical foundations for tutor training). Along with Frank Christ and Sylvia Mioduski, he also co-directs the annual Winter Institute and is the webster of the new Learning Support Center in Higher Education website. Rick is team-oriented, enjoys games, and is an active reader, computer addict, camper, music lover, and poet. His wife, partner, and friend is Barbara. His personal mission statement includes ". . . I want to continue to learn, grow, enjoy, and create; to integrate a part of me into all that I do . . ."