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COLLEGE PREP BLUEPRINT FOR BRIDGING AND SCAFFOLDING INCOMING FRESHMEN: PRACTICES THAT WORK

Author: Michael, Ann E; Dickson, John; Ryan, Barbara; Koefer, Ann

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Abstract: During two decades of administration, a commonwealth-supported grant (Act 101) has enabled a private, four-year, Catholic-affiliated university in Pennsylvania to develop an effective set of practices that enable under-prepared, economically-disadvantaged students to develop successful academic strategies. A summary of evidence-based best practices and their outcomes is presented, along with narrative of how these practices are implemented in the program. These practices include assessments, counseling, and teaching approaches to facilitate student growth and independence in academic, social, personal, and other aspects that have a powerful impact on the student's adjustment to undergraduate campus life. Current research suggests that, nation-wide, incoming freshman classes are under-prepared for college-level work; therefore, the approaches taken by the DeSales Act 101 program are likely to prove useful for more general student-body instruction and development or remediation through college readiness seminars, freshman-experience programs, academic bridge programs, counseling, intrusive advising and other proven strategies for student success. A summary of evidence-based best practices and their outcomes is presented, along with narrative of how these practices are implemented in the program. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

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During two decades of administration, a commonwealth-supported grant (Act 101) has enabled a private, four-year, Catholic-affiliated university in Pennsylvania to develop an effective set of practices that enable under-prepared, economically-disadvantaged students to develop successful academic strategies. A summary of evidence-based best practices and their outcomes is presented, along with narrative of how these practices are implemented in the program. These practices include assessments, counseling, and teaching approaches to facilitate student growth and independence in academic, social, personal, and other aspects that have a powerful impact on the student's adjustment to undergraduate campus life. Current research suggests that, nation-wide, incoming freshman classes are under-prepared for college-level work; therefore, the approaches taken by the DeSales Act 101 program are likely to prove useful for more general student-body instruction and development or remediation through college readiness seminars, freshman-experience programs, academic bridge programs, counseling, intrusive advising and other proven strategies for student success. A summary of evidence-based best practices and their outcomes is presented, along with narrative of how these practices are implemented in the program.

Key Words: best practices, at-risk student, higher education, academic bridge program, tutoring, counseling, academic preparation, assessments, undergraduate, remediation, scaffolding, freshman experience, college readiness, retention, graduation rates, economically disadvantaged

In a 2007 California study of college instructors, respondent feedback suggested American faculty members feel incoming freshman classes include significant numbers of students who are insufficently prepared for college-level academics. The problem spans mathematics, high-level text comprehension, writing, note-taking skills, and analysis (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges 2007). Pennsylvania's Department of Education released data showing similar concerns and suggesting that the expenses of remedial classes at the college level cost the average student $1,300 (Commonwealth of PA 2009). The situation threatens to have an
impact on grade inflation, retention, and decisions concerning remediation coursework and core curricula. Colleges may find they lack the necessary financial or faculty staffing resources to add developmental courses, ESL courses, or freshman academic bridge programs; and the institutions may have other reasons not to implement such programs.

Excellent developmental and preparatory work can be accomplished efficiently, however, especially when a bridging program continues through the freshman year. DeSales University, a private, four-year, religiously-affiliated university in Pennsylvania, has worked with Pennsylvania Department of Education under the auspices of the Act 101 Program to assure the academic success of economically-disadvantaged, at-risk students. There is a good retention rate among students in this program despite the students' classification of "high-risk." We believe that the approaches taken by Act 101 program facilitators may prove useful for more general student-body instruction and development or remediation for under-prepared freshmen through college readiness seminars, freshman-experience programs, academic bridge programs, counseling and other proven strategies for student success.

Our interpretation of the Act 101 Program has evolved over more than 20 years as the Commonwealth's Department of Education and accepted pedagogy have undergone changes. In the process of tracking our students' successes, evaluating staff performance, and meeting academic and state grant requirements, the DeSales team has researched best practices and assessed whether practices in the literature work for our program and our students. Charts accompanying this paper indicate the results of our institutional assessments; the main sources we have consulted for best practices are included in our reference list.

The Act 101 Program

Act 101 was established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) in 1971. PDE's definition of the program is "to deliver services to economically and educationally disadvantaged Pennsylvania college students" with the intent of enabling such students to have access to and to succeed in postsecondary education. PDE (2008) specifies that administrators of the program are expected to design an "array of services. ..typically [including] tutoring, mentoring, counseling and instruction."

As the Act 101 Program is implemented at DeSales University, a Summer College Readiness Program prepares freshman Act 101 students to be personally, socially, and academically successful during the freshman year. Incoming students are immersed in the skill-building activities required for a successful transition from high school to college learning. For four days each August, approximately 25 students live on campus, guided by Act 101 peer mentors. During this required seminar, students learn college-level methods of taking lecture notes, actively reading textbooks, preparing for tests/quizzes, appreciating the writing process, and presenting in the classroom. Additionally, students benefit from creating individual goal targets to accomplish during the first semester through a monitoring process with Act 101 staff members. This monitoring consists of required student-staff member contacts, initially for assessment and later for tutorial and academic counseling purposes. Act 101 students take a survey the following November as followup to the Summer College Readiness Program. Survey results demonstrate that the program prepared each student well for the personal, social, and academic challenges that await freshman students entering DeSales University (see Appendix).

Overview of Act 101 Implementation

Student-teacher contact is, of course, integral to the process of instruction and is assumed in all of the literature, even when discussing distance-learning programs; but the Act 101 program is predicated on the concept of individual, mentor-like relationships as a means to encourage academic behaviors in underprepared students. These mentors include professional staff members and trained students (peer mentors). The DeSales model starts with the PDE grant requirements and the college's recruitment process. Once the students have been accepted into the program, they sign an academic letter of agreement and contract to participate in the program fully. Each incoming freshman, accompanied by at least one parent, meets the program director to sign the document-individual relationships with Act 101 staff are established from the beginning. Students learn that they
are responsible for their own educations; signing a contract is the first step. As Drummond (1995) reports in his summary of best practices, student engagement and a student's sense of personal responsibility are significant factors in academic success.

Bridging between high school and college has been discussed in terms of readiness, remediation, and college orientation (Kirst, 2004; Kirst, Antonia, & Bueschel, 2004); and bridging is one complement of the Act 101 program as administered at DeSales. The term "bridging," however, is vague nomenclature and different institutions implement the practice in different ways. Kirst, for example, recommends bridging transition be addressed in the high school years; and the Stanford Bridge Project for which he is doing research notes that: Entering first-year students know little about the content of [collegelevel] exams; this could lead to poor scores on placement exams and the need for remediation. This lack of compatibility creates problems for students, such as increased costs and length of stay in undergraduate programs [increasing] costs and administrative burdens for institutions of higher education as well. This situation is particularly troubling for traditionally underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students because they often do not have family members who are familiar with higher education, and often lack the resources ... to help them successfully navigate the K-16 transition. (Stanford University)

In the DeSales Act 101 program, bridging is extended through the entire college experience, although program facilitators expect students to "grow away" from the academic and counseling scaffolding. The Summer Program, a four-day, three-night intensive orientation, initiates the process. Incoming freshmen must attend the Summer Program as well as attend weekly, individual sessions with Act 101 staff members during the first semester and semi-annual followup meetings thereafter until graduation, stipulations that are necessary to meet PDE rules concerning the grant program (PDE 2008).

The staff conducting the bridging process consists of four specialists: a Director/academic counselor, an academic/personal counselor, a reading/study-skills specialist, and a writing specialist. Individual sessions are 15 to 30 minutes long and provide the opportunity, rare in many colleges, for new students to build relationships with members of the university community face to face. Such meetings provide students a confidential atmosphere in which they may discuss challenges, needs, questions, and concerns which at-risk students, in particular, often find overwhelming. Drummond (1995) confirms that individual tutoring, academic counseling, and mentorship are educational best practices. The structure of the program therefore resembles other higher-education programs targeted to aid students designated academically at-risk, such as those aimed at ESL or international students and those which serve students with learning differences. Monitoring students through a loosely-structured bridging model encourages significant growth among students in interpersonal and academic areas.

Academic counseling is a significant contributor to student retention (NoelLevitz, 2007 p. 5). Guiding students in necessary coursework and decisions on majors keeps students on track for timely graduation. While studies suggest that undecided students are more likely to interrupt or discontinue their academic careers than students who have made their decisions by the first semester of sophomore year, Habley & McLanahan (2004) report that advising intervention is a retention strategy that is probably under-utilized on college campuses, even though academic advising is earmarked as one of the top three best practices for retention (p. 13, 20). Under the auspices of the Act 101 program, an academic counselor meets weekly with each student. The first 8 meetings are required by the student contract, and students consistently mention this component as a useful experience when they assess the program. (See Appendix). Student assessment of Act 101 services is positive in all areas of implementation, and most of the students in the program also acknowledge their initial lack of preparedness for college-level academic expectations.

Roles of Professional Support Staff

The facilitators at DeSales' Act 101 Program address students' potential academic deficits by requiring first-semester freshmen to meet with professional tutors in September and October. Earlier, during the student
application process, the Director interviews each student candidate in order to inform the staff members about student strengths, weaknesses, and potential risk areas in academics. Individual meetings with freshmen thus extend the summer bridge seminar through the first half of the fall semester, when students gain confidence and learn academic strategies during the process of taking actual course work. They therefore can apply the preparation they’ve received immediately, if they choose to, and learn from their own results through self-assessment as well as through other forms of feedback. Tutoring is labor-intensive, but professional and peer tutoring pay off in the long run (see Grasha, 2003; Harris, 2000; Kuh, 2007). Tutors can help students stay in their majors, remain enrolled, and reach their degree goals (thereby becoming grateful alumni). Retention and graduation rates for Act 101 students meet or exceed cohort rates (see Retention Rates chart).

The Act 101 staff employs the bridging and scaffolding metaphors because these concepts do not place all of the responsibility for teaching upon the professional; students must take active and responsible roles to reach their goals and are assessed partly on their willingness to do so. Chi’s work on “scaffolded explanations in tutoring” (1996) explains the importance of the role and actions of the student being tutored. She writes that while in the one-to-one tutoring meeting, “students are placed in a situation in which they are given greater opportunities to generate answers or explanations” (p. S36). Students therefore learn to “construct self-explanations” more readily and more independently than in other types of learning environments (S36-37). They also get to interact and verbalize, tools that are useful for students who have not been well-prepared for analytical reading and writing. Scaffolding is also implied in Drummond’s (1995) best practices as “fostering learner self-responsibility” (Drummond).

The California study cited earlier notes that “83% of faculty say that the lack of analytical reading skills contributes to students’ lack of success in a course” (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2007). Through the Act 101 Program, professional tutors in writing and reading administer pre-semester assessments for each freshman in the program (Nelson-Denny, CUNY writing, etc.) in order to customize developmental or remedial approaches to student needs. All freshmen are required to meet with the reading specialist; for most of them, this is a new experience and an eye-opening one. They are frequently unprepared for note-taking, lecture or textbook content comprehension, or for managing the volume of text-reading required in college courses. "No one ever taught me how to study," is a common response from new students, along with: "Why didn’t they teach us how to write like this in high school?" A teamwork approach among staff members reinforces the reading-writing connection, especially the analysis-for-comprehension required for high-level texts that gets neglected once formal instruction in reading “fades away” after elementary-school years. The DeSales writing tutor and the reading/study skills tutor work together to ensure that their approaches overlap- that students write to read and read to write, reinforcing analysis and critical thinking at every step until the students realize they can engage in these processes on their own.

The California faculty respondents estimated that only one-third of "entering college students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned writing tasks: analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information from several sources" (2007). In other words, there are more students in need of writing and reading tutoring than those who may be termed "at risk."

Addressing "Non-Academic" Needs

The Act 101 team at DeSales includes a professional who acts as a soundingboard and referral person, mentoring students through stressful issues and guiding them toward accepting help from tutors and others with an eye toward maintaining academic success. The personal aspect of student adjustment to college is crucial; but because "personal adjustment" is difficult to assess, the DeSales staff members have had to customize methods of delivering counseling services. Here, as in other areas, the ESOL method of "scaffolding" (Echevarría, Vogt, Short, 2007 p. 246), a concept Wood, Bruner and Ross applied to general teaching in 1976, has been a useful model to adapt as a best practice in the arena of students' personal responsibilities while they learn to manage the tricky balancing act required in the freshman year and throughout college. Wood &Wood
(1996) define scaffolding as an attempt to determine the nature of guidance through which the teacher (or mentor) "could serve several key tutoring functions" including the student's engagement in the task or problem, focusing on goals, and "demonstrating how to achieve goals and helping to control frustration" (p. 5).

Freshmen in particular often need guidance on how to achieve such a balance between their academic and personal lives. Naturally, psychological crises among students require referral to appropriate specialists; but our experience indicates that the majority of freshman adjustment problems are more likely to include roommate or peer conflict, difficulties with parents, moderate self-esteem issues, lack of prioritizing, financial problems and part-time job scheduling conflicts, and the distracting influences of romance and social events on or off-campus.

The need for such guidance extends beyond the arenas covered by study-skills coaching, as a non-academic example will serve to illustrate: keeping in mind that most non-academic problems do have an impact on academic success in college. Although Act 101 students receive scholarship and work-study aid, many of them still must work off-campus to meet their college and living expenses. Studies compiled for an article by Orsag, Orsag & Whitmore (2001) indicate that students who are employed for more than 25 hours a week experience a negative impact upon the quality of academic work; and "the study also finds that students who work continuously take somewhat longer to graduate than non-workers: Student workers took an average of 9.2 semesters to graduate, compared to 8.9 semesters for those who have at least one non-working semester" (Orsag, Orsag & Whitmore, 2001). These studies also indicate that working more than 20-25 hours weekly has at least some negative impact on GPA, a statistic also confirmed by Kulm & Cramer (2006). Therefore, non-academic counseling for students who are at risk of academic problems from any of the above reasons proves to be significantly positive, whether the professional suggests compromises, helps to research scholarship aid, or helps the student to balance responsibilities maturely.

In keeping with DeSales University's mission, we recognize that spiritual wellbeing nurtures the minds of students who are undergoing enormous personal changes in their lives, and that counseling by both professionals and peers can encourage personal and educational growth. According to Cannister (1999), "an essential element of the supportive role is provision of structure. Daloz notes that for freshmen, who have recently left the extremely structured high school environment... clear expectations... are important. Structure may be reduced as students take on greater decision-making responsibilities" (p. 770). Cannister cites Bufford, Paloutzian & Ellison (1991) who likewise mention Daloz's 1986 description of teaching-mentors as key in enhancing student "well-being" and in encouraging students to grow away from initial support systems, suggesting that mentors and mentoring systems "may be used to influence more than just spirituality. Many other areas of student development may also benefit" (p. 67). The scaffolding model thus seems to operate effectively in non-academic areas of freshman adaptation to college life.

Literature on the positive effects of peer mentorship has reinforced the benefits of peer mentors for incoming students (Imel, 1994). Freshman response to the Act 101 peer mentors bears this out; these upperclassmen operate as compassionate listeners, role models, problem-solvers and are widely praised by students in followup assessments of the program. Choosing and training these students is carried out by the entire staff. The professional counselor works most closely with the mentors on social issues, employing small-group training sessions in critical thinking and "common sense," legal concerns, and confidentiality. Because peer mentors are mentioned so often in positive freshman experience evaluations, we strongly suggest that a peer-mentoring program of at least one semester be incorporated as a best practice in preparing at-risk students for college transition (see Appendix).

Conclusion

While the Act 101 Program may impose more accountability upon students because they must meet the contractual specifications to ensure their scholarship aid, the program's initiatives and practices are applicable to cohort students not bound by such responsibilities. We want to stress that PDE's Act 101 grants do not
coddle students; scaffolding is a process entirely different from "hand-holding" in aims and pedagogical approaches. Ultimately, it is up to the student to seek help and to apply what he or she has learned through academic services once the initial student contract period has ended- this result is the goal of all applied best practices in our program. Because of perceived and actual under-preparedness of incoming freshmen, however, college academic administrators might do well to consider the wider application of effective coaching practices such as semester-long bridging programs, mentorship and peer mentorship, high-visibility or required tutoring programs and student contractual accountability. The program described above has had measurably positive outcomes for its participants and the institution as a whole and lends itself to broader adaptation in higher education communities.

References


Appendix

APPENDIX

Student Assessment of Academic Preparation for College
after completion of Act 101 Summer Program and 9 weeks of bridging into freshman year


Note: The response questions (12-15 questions on each annual survey) vary, as they have been revised on a yearly basis to reflect areas of particular interest to the program administrators. The information above was culled from 2005, 2008, and 2009 responses to questions that have appeared on every questionnaire during those years and reflects 51 respondent students. Some respondents do not answer all questions. Percentages are based upon number of returned surveys, not total number of students per year, and percentages are averaged over three years.

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