FACTORS GED STUDENTS ATTRIBUTE TO PERSISTENCE IN POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

By Maria C. Rose, Fairmont State College

Abstract

Many risk factors influence whether students complete postsecondary education. Several studies have researched traditional student populations and have found factors such as institutional environment, student traits, goal commitment, and enrollment patterns influence persistence; however, little research has been conducted to examine the postsecondary persistence of GED students. This article presents qualitative information about the persistence of GED students enrolled in a four-year institution; in-depth interviews of twelve students taken from a sample of 251 GED students enrolled during a specific semester provided themes of persistence. Many financial, social, and academic factors were found to influence whether students remain in college.

A variety of risk factors influences whether students complete postsecondary education. Researchers have studied factors that contribute to persistence of traditional college students, but very little research has been conducted on the persistence of nontraditional college students. Most often age has been the defining characteristic for the nontraditional population. Other variables typically used to characterize nontraditional students are associated with their background, residence, level of employment, and path from high school to college. For purposes of this paper, nontraditional students are identified by the presence of one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, part time attendance, financial independence, full time employment, dependents other than a spouse, single parents, or lack of a standard high school diploma. Students with one nontraditional characteristic are considered minimally nontraditional; those with two or three nontraditional characteristics are categorized moderately nontraditional; and those with four or more nontraditional characteristics are categorized as highly nontraditional.

About 6% of the postsecondary undergraduates enrolled in 1992-93 were not traditional high school graduates, and most of these students were GED recipients (Horn & Premo, 1996). A number of GED examinees have been away from any form of institutional education for many years. These students may be unfamiliar with the overall structure of higher education, including curriculum requirements and adequate preparation for a career. Traditional college students are generally more successful in attaining degrees than their less traditional peers (Horn & Premo, 1996). One reason for this success is that traditional students are often better prepared academically to enter college (US Department of Education, 1996). In addition, traditional college students generally have adequate financial support from their

families and financial aid programs (Jones & Collier, 1990). Furthermore, as the undergraduate population has expanded to include more women, older students, minorities, and students from low-income families, students at risk of not completing their educational program has increased (Jones & Collier, 1990).

In addition to the financial and social problems less traditional students may encounter, nontraditional students often have enrollment patterns that are known to reduce the chances of completing a degree. Specifically, these students delay attending postsecondary institutions, and even after they are enrolled in higher education programs, they often attend only on a part-time basis (U.S. Department of Education, 1989). Many risk factors, personal and institutional, influence whether students complete postsecondary education.

GED Candidates in Transition—Theories of Adult Learning

Adults cannot be categorized just by age, stage, role complexity, cognitive capacity or learning styles. Neugarten (1979) points out that individuals in a group of sixty-year-olds are less similar to each other than those in a group of six-year-olds; as lives grow longer, choices and commitments cause adults to be vastly different from each other. GED students are adult learners who have been motivated to secure a GED certificate for academic, personal, or financial reasons. Transition theory can be applied to learners young and old, male or female, minority or majority, urban or rural (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Most adults returning to school are in either a career or a family transition, and GED recipients fall into this category. In spite of individual differences, the common identifier of adults in the education setting is that they are experiencing transitions.

Cross (1983) maintains that almost every adult has more than one reason for engaging in learning. Adult learners are most frequently motivated by the desire to use or apply knowledge. Cross categorizes learners as goal oriented, activity oriented, and learning oriented. Goal oriented learners use learning to meet specific objectives and seek learning activities that will provide the necessary knowledge or skills. Activity oriented learners, however, participate in learning primarily for the sake of the activity itself rather than to develop a skill or learn subject matter. Finally, the learning oriented adult pursues learning for its own sake; learning usually starts with a decision to spend time learning and is followed by a decision about what to learn.

Morstain and Smart (1974) found that social relationships, external expectations, social welfare, professional advancement, escape or stimulation, and cognitive interest are some of the factors that motivate learning. In a study by Aslanian and Brickell (1980), transitions, such as job changes, marriage, arrival of children, and retirement require adults to seek new learning. They found 82% of adults interviewed named some transition as the motivating factor for learning.

Postsecondary Persisters and Non-Persisters

Spady (1970) was the first to develop a model of the college dropout process that emphasized the impact of social and academic factors on student persistence in college. In Spady's model, college is viewed as a social system with its own values and social structure; the dropouts from that social system are identified in a manner similar to that of dropouts from larger society. Using Spady's model, Tinto (1975) expanded the model to explain how and why students drop out of college. His model cited individual characteristics, prior experiences, goal commitment, and integration into the academic and social system of the institution as having an impact on student retention. Tinto viewed dropping out of college as a process that involved aspects of the student's past and present life.

Beltzer (1985) conducted a study to test Tinto's conceptual model on a group of GED examinees. The sample consisted of 198 GED students and 201 traditional high school graduates who entered Queensborough Community College in the fall 1981. Students responded to a questionnaire to determine their levels of academic integration, social integration, institutional commitment, and goal commitment. The results of the investigation supported the predictive validity of the Tinto Model in identifying potential dropouts among GED examinees. For the GED examinees, 81% of the persisters and 74% of the dropouts were predicted successfully. The study showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the GED examinees and the traditional high school graduates in the rate of persistence. Older GED examinees had a slightly higher persistence rate than students between the ages of seventeen and nineteen. Also, for GED examinees, the first year grade point average was the most important predictor of persistence.

Spady, Tinto, and Beltzer viewed the college dropout process as a pattern of life involving all aspects of life. However, Bean (1985) placed more emphasis on the postsecondary institutional factors as determinants of college persistence. Bean found college grades, institutional fit, institutional commitment, and environmental factors were positively related to dropout syndrome. Institutional fit and institutional commitment had the greatest net effect on dropout syndrome. In a similar study, Pascarella (1985) found that institutional environment, organizational characteristics, and student pre-college traits directly impacted the interaction of peers and faculty. In addition, the quality of student effort was directly influenced by the student's background and the demands of the institution and social environment. This supports the aspect of Tinto's model that highlights the importance of integration into the academic and social system of college. In yet another study, Turner (1989) found that support from family and college personnel influenced retention.

Many of the factors detrimental to postsecondary persistence are associated with students who did not follow a traditional path to postsecondary education (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Not receiving a traditional high school diploma, delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school, being financially independent of parents, having children, being a single parent, attending school part time, and working full time while enrolled in postsecondary education are factors identified by the U.S. Department of Education as contributing to risk

of attrition. As the number of risk factors increases, the overall likelihood of attaining a degree or of still being enrolled five years after beginning postsecondary education decreases. More than 78% of the first-time beginners with no risk factors when they began postsecondary education had attained a credential or were still enrolled; however, only 43% of those with three or more risk factors persisted (Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, & McCormick, 1996).

There has been little research examining persistence behavior of GED examinees and how these students actually integrate into the academic and social systems of the institutions. The New Brunswick Department of Advanced Education and Training (1990) conducted a study to determine the success rate of GED holders in five New Brunswick community colleges. The study concluded that GED students who entered New Brunswick community colleges did as well as or better than traditional high school graduates. Roy (1975) found that students who withdrew from Bristol Community College were not necessarily failing. The main reasons for withdrawal were financial problems, illness, and transfer to a four-year college. Baird (1960) found a significant difference in GED holders at East Tennessee State University when college achievement was compared to age, years of high school completed, years in military service, and high school courses in math, science, or English.

Design of Current Study

Participants

From 251 students with GED certification enrolled at a small, four-year college with a community college component, twelve GED students were interviewed. The college offers one-year certificates, two-year associate degrees, and four-year baccalaureate degrees. Of these interviewed students, half were classified as successful students based on having a GPA of 2.0 or greater and having completed two or more semesters of college. The remaining six were categorized as unsuccessful students based on having a GPA below 2.0 after two or more semesters or by having dropped out of college during the first semester enrolled. The grade point averages, GED scores, ACT scores, and persistence in college were gathered for each of these students. Of these interviewed students, five were males and seven were females; eleven of the interviewed students were enrolled in associate degree programs, and one was enrolled in a baccalaureate program. All of the interviewed students are considered nontraditional because of the GED certification rather than a traditional high school diploma; however, one student was considered only minimally nontraditional.

Procedures

A list of structured questions was used in the interview procedures; however, the interviews were not strictly structured. If interview questions were inappropriate for the student being interviewed, they were omitted, or if students expressed interest in talking more about a topic, they were allowed to say as much as they wished about the topic. If students felt uncomfortable about an area, they were instructed that they were not required to answer the

question. Probing questions, such as can you tell me more; can you give a specific example; and can you elaborate on that idea were used to elicit more information about an interesting area.

Interviews were audio taped, and then the taped interviews were transcribed. A phenomenological perspective as described by Hycner (1985) was used in analyzing the qualitative data. The transcripts were read and the tapes were listened to in order to get a sense of the contexts in which information was presented. A summary of each of the interviews was written. Then the transcripts were segmented into idea units, and the themes that were dominant among the idea units were identified. Finally, the idea units were placed into categories. Participants were given code names to protect their identities, and were asked to review their transcripts to make sure all information was correct. In addition, if the participants said anything in the interview that they did not want revealed, it was omitted from the transcripts.

Results

There were several themes that emerged from the interviews of these successful and not-so-successful students. Some of the themes are common for these two groups, but some of the themes show reasons for success or lack of success for these students. Generally, the college experiences are influenced by a variety of life circumstances, and these situations help define themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes can be correlated with persistence characteristics identified by previous researchers. Some of these themes recount institutional characteristics similar to those identified by Bean, and other themes indicate persistence characteristics that are more encompassing of the life skills identified by Spady, Tinto, and Beltzer.

Student Characteristics

The GED students from this study are nontraditional; student characteristics are presented in Table 1 on the following page. Some are nontraditional because of age and stage of development. However, all of the GED students are nontraditional in the sense that they did not choose a traditional path from high school to college. This often created problems for these students. Not only have they missed educational opportunities by choosing to shorten their high school learning, but they also are without many of the support structures that are designed to help high school graduates make the transition to college. They do not know the rules and procedures associated with the new learning environment. Furthermore, they do not always know where to get the correct information they need about college procedures.

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Table 1. Student Characteristics

Group	N	Age	GED Score	ACT Score	GPA
Successful Students	6	40.3	46.3	17.66	2.84
Not-as-successful Students	6	47.9	47.9	15.5	1.069
Entire GED Population	251	30.6	51.2	17.952	2.553

Student Persistence

All except one of the interviewed students enrolled in the semester following this study; however, five of the twelve students did not enroll one year later. All five of these students were eligible to enroll, and, in fact, two of the students had grade point averages above 3.0. One of the students graduated with an associate degree, but she is enrolled, working toward her four-year degree. Another student will graduate with a baccalaureate degree this term with a 3.097 GPA, and the remaining four are currently enrolled.

Discussion

These students have not been in a vacuum since leaving high school. Indeed, they have learned many things that can help them in college either through employment opportunities, life experiences, or military experiences. Even more, they are often ready to pursue learning that they were not ready for earlier in their lives. There are many financial, social, and academic factors such as individual characteristics, goal commitments, or institutional determinants that influence GED students' persistence in college.

Financial Concerns

All of the students who were interviewed said that they were in college in order to get a good job; these students are committed to the goal of attaining a good job and see college as the path to this goal. Four of the students have had good jobs in the past, but lost those jobs for some reason. Two of the students have been employed only at minimum wage jobs, and they want something better. An additional two of the students interviewed are concerned about physical limitations and being able to do the jobs they had in the past, either because of physical disabilities or because of aging. Three of the interviewed students have been housewives and mothers and have not been in the workforce for some time. Finally, one student is a 19-year old who has never been in the workforce. Some of these students have had to rely on the welfare system for assistance. As Tinto points out, prior experiences are often motivating factors. For these students, they know they cannot succeed with their current credentials. All of these students also have financial concerns about college that are mitigating factors for persistence.

Some of the students have suffered economic hardships, so they know what it is like to live without the necessary resources. They are either currently getting public assistance or have relied on it in the past for support. Some of the other students have had good jobs but have lost them. All of these students are trying to regain the salaries that they have had in the past.

These students stated that if their jobs were still available, they would not be in college. Yet, all of these students are highly motivated to succeed. They might not like being in college, but they are successful students. They know that the jobs they once had are no longer there, so they have no choice but to prepare for other jobs. On the other hand, several of the students want to get out of low paying jobs or jobs that do not offer benefits, such as insurance and retirement plans, and these students know that there are limited opportunities to succeed in minimum wage jobs.

Social Motivations

Many self-esteem issues are connected with dropping out of high school. These students want to change the dropout label they have because of not completing high school and learn from their mistakes. Most are determined not to drop out again. Often GED students see themselves as failures because they did not finish high school, but even more, their family and friends view them as failures for having not completed high school. Students have learned a lot about themselves since leaving high school, and are in the developmental stage of defining how they relate to the world and how they are a part of it. They have passed the GED Tests, and now they are trying to succeed in the postsecondary educational environment.

Students have different personal reasons for attending college. Some of the students indicated that college gave them something positive to do, while others are in college for learning opportunities and to prepare for a career. Still other students are in college either because of encouragement from family and friends or in spite of negative family reactions. For others, the opportunity was there to attend college, so they took advantage of it.

Positive reactions students had to college include that they have been able to meet a lot of nice people and that attending college has given them a good feeling about themselves. Several students said they know that they would not have succeeded in college if they had tried to attend college earlier in their lives. However, now that they are in college, most of the students feel as though they will "better themselves" by being in college. Several of the students said that college had given them confidence, and this confidence often prompted them to try new things. Students said that they were frightened when they first started college and felt like dropping out during the first few weeks. Getting over the initial fear of the new college learning situation is one of the hardest things these students must accomplish. Once that is accomplished, students are often able to gain a better self-image.

Supporting Turner's findings, these students report that family and friends have a great influence on student attendance and persistence in college. Supportive family members are

often the determining factor for these students to continue in college or drop out. Some of the students have close friends or family members who are also in college, and they draw support from one another. Yet other students view college as a way to prove to family members that they can succeed; completing college is a way to compensate for dropping out of high school.

Several students say that determination is what is keeping them in college; they are committed to the goal of attending college. The nontraditional student group at this college gives students an opportunity to share problems and concerns with others that are in the same situation. These students are determined to improve their quality of life either by getting a good job or by starting their own company. Having supportive family and friends helps students maintain a high level of determination.

Academic Concerns

The majority of the GED students in this study have the potential to succeed. If GED scores indicate a level of competence similar to the skills of high school graduates, all the students in this study have GED scores that indicate a satisfactory level of competence. In addition, the mean ACT for the interviewed students was 16.5, compared to the mean group ACT of 17.9. The college GPA for the successful students was 2.84, for the not-as-successful students it was 1.069, and for the entire GED group it was 2.553. These students did not complete high school, but most often it was not due to academic problems.

Most of the GED students felt as though college had always been an unattainable goal for them; however, now that they are attending college, they are learning a lot. Some of the students are struggling with academic skills, but others have learned how to adjust their study techniques to the different classes they are required to take. The students find some of the classes more difficult than others and enjoy some classes more than others. When they have academic difficulties, students get help from friends, tutors, or study groups. Some of the GED students are managing their academic learning more effectively than some of the other GED students. Several of the students said they thought that only students who made A's could go to college. Surprisingly, none of the interviewed students felt as though they could have done anything differently to prepare for college. Two of the students said they wished that they had finished high school; however, it was not because of the learning they felt that they had lost, but rather it was peoples' perceptions of them because they did not have a traditional high school diploma. A common consensus from several of the students was that they wished they had not waited so long to come to college, but instead that something had prompted them to attend college sooner.

The interviewed GED students said they like the learning aspect of college. The courses that are generally easiest for them are those that apply directly to their majors. In fact, several students commented that they could not see the need for some of the classes that they were required to take. Most of the students liked the hands-on learning opportunities provided by classes related to their majors. For example, the food service majors must complete

practicum projects where they work in various businesses in the community related to the food industry.

Students commented that generally they earned better grades in the classes they liked than the ones they didn't. Students found general requirement courses for math, English, and social studies the hardest classes. Generally, students said they could not always see a need for these classes, and this made trying to study for them difficult. These are most likely the courses that GED students do not have adequate background for because of high school deficiencies. In addition, they commented that a lot of material was covered in these classes, and it was often difficult to grasp all the information as quickly as it was presented.

Several of the students commented that they had learned how to study better since being in college, and they had learned to like the challenge of learning. Often, students had to drop out of classes where the work was too difficult and take these classes at another time, and sometimes they chose to take the course with a different professor. All of the students said that they spent several hours each day outside of class studying although grade point averages did not always reflect this reported study time. Students who said they spent the most time studying were the ones who did not complete the courses or who had unsatisfactory grades in the classes. Generally, the average time the interviewed students spent studying was between three and four hours a day on studies outside of class with times varying according to the amount of work they had to do and the nature of their courses.

Students often chose the college or the major plan of study based on academic concerns. All of the students said that they had chosen college over a vocational school because they felt college had more to offer them and that they could learn more in college. Some of the students chose their majors by going through the college catalogue to find what majors required the fewest number of math courses. All of the interviewed students except one were enrolled in associate degree programs. Several of the students said that they would like to enroll in a four-year program, but only one had taken any of the classes required for the four-year programs. Of the students enrolled in a four-year program, several are concerned about course academics.

The most successful of the interviewed students were the ones who had declared a major and who were clear about their job goals. The two food service majors knew they liked the food industry even though they did not know exactly what kind of job they would get when they finished their degrees. The four-year degree technology major has had several job prospects, and one of the criminal justice majors knew he would be working at some type of job related to his criminal justice major. However, the less successful students who were interviewed were uncertain about the majors they had chosen or about the job options their degrees will support.

Implications

Finances can influence a student's commitment to college. Many GED students depend on some outside funding source, and without this additional funding, they may not be able to continue in college. In addition, these funding sources have frequently been the motivating factor for attending college. Often, students are concerned about whether they can finish their degrees before their funding runs out because without the funding they will not be able to attend. Most often these funding programs require a specified number of hours each semester and adequate performance in the courses, so this causes pressure for students who are not in the habit of studying. Students need help from institutions to identify or secure other funding sources if their funding is exhausted.

Students often attend college because of a financial transition period in their lives. Many have lost jobs, so they are trying gain knowledge in order to get new jobs; other students are trying to secure their first good job. Not only is college itself expensive, but these students are counting on their work at college to get them a job so they will have security. Finances not only affect college attendance, but they are also the motivating factor for students to persist in college and find good jobs. College career services can help students know job prospects and anticipated salaries. Concrete career goals often maximize goal commitment.

Many social factors have influenced students to attend college, and even more are keeping them in college. Even though some of the students may not complete their degree programs, they are attaining goals that are relevant to them personally. College helps students gain confidence in themselves and their abilities and learn about the world around them. However, many of the students who are almost finished with their degree programs fear that they might not be able to give up their current jobs in order to get a job pertaining to their new degrees. These students feel that they have accomplished a lot by completing their degrees even though their degrees might not lead to the kind of job they want to have or provide them with the standard of living they want. College counseling services can assist students in addressing these concerns.

Developmental classes help provide skills necessary to succeed in college. Many GED students do not have adequate preparation in basic math and English skills, so these developmental classes help them make the transition to college and fill those gaps between high school and college. Study skills instruction courses can also assist students who are having difficulty knowing how to study and how to process information.

When students are having difficulty in classes, they need to know support services are available. Peer tutors can often help underprepared students with class work and focus on what students do not understand. Other support services such as supplemental instruction and study groups can make the difference in whether or not these students succeed in college. Many GED students have high levels of anxiety, so college support services are important to ease some of that anxiety. Orientation programs, study skills programs, study groups, tutoring, and support groups like nontraditional student groups are important to all

college students, but these programs are particularly important to students who are highly apprehensive and who have not had prior success in an academic setting. Most of all, good academic advising is necessary for this GED population so that students know what courses to take, and so students are not overloaded. Most of these GED students have family responsibilities, so they are not mobile and must make adjustments to fit the institution, rather than change institutions.

Conclusions

As in the past, demographic events will continue to influence the higher education market over the next years. Although college is generally considered a residential institution for younger students, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of nontraditional students on college campuses over the past two decades. Changes in the complexion of colleges will require changes in the focus of colleges. This nontraditional age group represents a heterogeneous population. Some are full time students, some are pursuing degrees in the evenings and weekends, some are single parents enrolled as part-time students, and some are seeking a new employment option. These adults bring a different set of needs and expectations to the campus and to the classroom than traditional college students.

Intervention strategies can focus on multiple concerns of the GED segment of the nontraditional college population. Providing students with information on college procedures, finances, and programs of study is very important. Often these students are in a transition period, and they are confused about what they should pursue next. Students need to have access to adequate information on requirements for major programs of study and on qualifications for jobs associated with these majors. In addition, funding programs are necessary for this new student population to be able to attend college. This student population needs to have adequate financial aid information and information on the requirements and restrictions for these financial aid programs. Often GED students have changed as individuals and are ready to fulfill a commitment to completing a postsecondary degree. With support from postsecondary institutions, many of them can succeed.

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION

PHILOSOPHY OF WRITING FROM A DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

As a graduate student, I did extensive reading about the history of developmental education, the paradigm shifts in composition studies, and the theories about learning, cognition, and adult education both from traditional perspectives and from newer practitioners in the field. That reading created in me a renewed sense of awe and appreciation for the philosophy of learning, especially when I reflected on my own practice and the curriculum that I had been instrumental in designing. The stimulating discussions with my cohorts in the graduate classroom spilled over into the teacher meetings I had with my colleagues in my work setting. Rather than just talk and let our valuable insights dissipate into the air where we would not be able to retrieve them with the intensity that characterized our discussions, I wanted to commit our conversations to writing. With input from my colleagues, I began to put our thoughts into written format—to start to create a philosophy of teaching developmental writing for our own practice—so that we could refer to it as we continued to develop our curriculum, use it in orientation settings with teachers new to the department, and share it with interested composition teachers in other developmental education settings. My goal was to have a statement capturing our basic beliefs about teaching writing within this particular setting; I wanted to do this and felt it was important. But the prospect of joining in a conversation with others and getting their input about what they do and why became equally intriguing. Our philosophy is not yet in final form; we do not have a pithy statement of what we do and why. But we are hopefully headed in that direction. Even though we are still in that process, my purpose here is to share some of our beliefs about our practice of teaching developmental writing in an attempt to get interested colleagues in other academic settings involved in a dialogue about the writing philosophies in their practices. Since I am interested in the beliefs and theories that form the foundation of what others do in their writing programs, I am hoping others may be interested and willing to share as well.

A Philosophy of Writing

In the college where I work and in the writing program that I coordinate, all writing is seen as developmental. This means that students are working to continually improve their writing

abilities as they progress through the curriculum. In the college, we teach writing as one communication mode within a curriculum that integrates other expressive (speaking) and receptive (reading and listening) communication modes. Integrating the four primary communication modes reflects actual language use and development. It seems natural to talk about what we read, to listen when someone speaks, to write our thoughts, and to read what we or others have written. The ability to be effective in one of the communication modes can be helpful in developing the abilities in the other modes. There is a compatibility between reading and writing and between speaking and listening. To build on the similarities and the connections between and among the modes fosters growth in all the modes.

We believe that writing is a learned ability. The best way, and maybe the only way, to learn how to write is by writing. Furthermore, one effective way to learn to write is to have something important or significant to say, a reason for saying it, and someone to say it to. These conditions provide the philosophical foundation for writing instruction in the Instructional Services sequence of communication seminars, a group of courses which integrate the communications abilities of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. We place emphasis on the communication of ideas, to an audience, for a purpose.

Even though our structure integrates the instruction of multiple communication modes, we do isolate our particular beliefs about the teaching of writing. For us, first and foremost, writing is an ability that can be learned. It is an expressive mode of communication and a meaning-making process. Therefore, meaningful expression of ideas takes priority over other things including grammatical or technical perfection. A writer needs to figure out what she wants to say and why, commit those thoughts and purposes to a written format, and anticipate the audience's reaction to her ideas. All these things result in a primary emphasis on writing processes, rather than written products. The processes take the writer through a recursive—not linear—series of drafting, writing, and revising stages in order to generate, organize, phrase, and evaluate her ideas. They assist with all the composing phases from getting her thoughts together to the final checking for grammatical and sentence level correctness. Those same processes keep her aware of real world deadlines and assignment due dates but allow time for her to get reader input (peer review), and to do self assessment.

These processes engage the student in a variety of writing tasks and roles. When she writes, she is, at various times, both the composer and the critic of her ideas, the producer of the text and the architect of its structure, the first reader and the final authority of what she has to say. When she switches roles and becomes a reviewer of what her peers have written, she responds to their words as an audience might, questions ideas needing development or clarification, and provides suggestions for revision. Switching between the roles of writer and reader, both of her own text and that of others, she actually begins to see the qualities that contribute to or inhibit effective communication. The environment in which she works to improve her writing abilities consists of her hands-on experience with writing, from the initial creation of meaning to the final expression of ideas to others.

With our emphasis on meaningful communication and audience, writing also becomes a social act, even if the writer is totally alone while composing. The writer uses her expressive abilities to clarify her ideas and share them with her intended audience. But for the beginning writer, audience can be a difficult concept to acquire, and relating to a specific audience may be even more difficult. To make the concept of audience a bit clearer, the writer regularly engages in a peer review process. In other words, she shares her writing with her classmates. By having someone else read or listen to her paper and provide input, the writer moves beyond an abstract notion of audience to a very real interaction with the receiver of her ideas. Furthermore, a writer will conference with her teachers. Writing conferences are writer centered and have flexibility so that they can focus on a hierarchy of concerns—starting with big items that have the greatest impact on meaning and working down toward the specific items that affect sentence clarity and meaning. The act of sharing her writing increases the writer's ability to connect with an audience and at the same time, helps her to improve her writing abilities. In addition, the social act of sharing knowledge (information the writer has as well as her opinions) with an audience can inform the audience's thinking and deepen the writer's own understanding of ideas as well.

In addition to frequent and informative feedback from her instructor and her peers, we also place an emphasis on developing the writer's autonomy and independence, by teaching her to self assess, to identify for herself the areas of strength she consistently demonstrates and the areas she needs to improve. While feedback from instructor and peers helps her see her writing from another person's perspective, the ability to self assess accurately and at various times during her writing process is essential if the student is to continue to develop those processes. This allows her to grow in self confidence and authority over the text she has produced and to use her writing abilities in the personal and professional settings after graduation. As she learns to write, she is also finding out about the characteristics of good writing. At our college, a small, private, liberal arts college for women, with an ability-based curriculum, we have a list of writing behaviors or criteria that describe characteristics contributing to an effective written performance. This list is used throughout the whole college. Rather than impose this list on the fledgling writer, we use what she already knows about writing to help her generate a personalized list of writing behaviors to strive for. While her terminology might initially be different from that used college-wide, it bears a striking similarity to the "official" criteria. As she develops as a writer, she is able to translate and transform her personal list of writing criteria into the language used at the college and to have that language be as meaningful to her as her original phrasing was. Regardless of the terminology, once she has a language to talk about her writing, she can continue the development of her self assessment abilities. As part of this process, she reflects on each writing performance, observes the particular writing behaviors (criteria) that are strong or need to be developed, compares her performance to previous performances and to the established criteria, and plans the next performance taking this information into account.

Philosophy in Practice

The students at our college are involved in a curriculum designed to address their current level of ability and to build on what they already know. Instruction depends upon the writer's previous knowledge of concepts (sentence, grammar, punctuation, to name a few) as evidenced by her performance on the writing portion of a communication placement assessment taken prior to her entrance into the degree program. From self assessment and feedback on that writing sample, the student has an idea of the patterns she has demonstrated. New performances are compared to that baseline performance.

Influences

Three essential influences have impacted the development of our philosophy of writing: 1) a strong belief in the benefits of integrating the teaching of reading and writing; since we see them as compatible communication abilities, knowledge of and progress in one of those modes has a corresponding positive effect on the other, 2) the inclusion of a large body of experiential knowledge resulting from our years of practice in the field of developmental education, and 3) the theoretical base provided by developmental and English educators. We have incorporated, among others, the thinking of Elbow (1981), Shaughnessy (1977), Harris (1986), Rose (1989), Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986). Some ideas have become particularly meaningful, like Elbow's expressive approach to composing processes, the necessary separation of the creative and critical aspects of writing, and the belief that the writer has to like what she wrote if she is going to persist with multiple revisions. Shaughnessy reminded us of the logic behind the error; Harris of the value of the writing conference as a way to individualize writing instruction; Rose of the beginning level writer trying to negotiate an academic environment and learning how to write within that setting for discipline courses; and the team of Bartholomae and Petrosky for their emphasis on the connections between reading and writing. We have also adopted the TRPP (Theory, Research, Principles, Practice) model proposed by Casazza and Silverman as a way to continue developing our philosophy, to have a solid foundation for the work that we do, and to help our students be successful writers in their academic and, eventually, their professional careers.

We seek input from you, our colleagues, and a continuation of the conversation on developing a philosophy of writing.

Susan Witkowski *is the Assistant Director of the Instructional Services Department at Alverno College.*

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MCLCA THIRTEENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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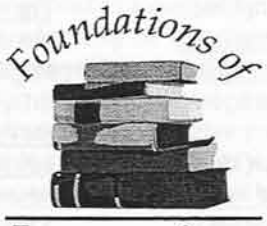

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BOOK REVIEW

IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING SKILLS

By Robin Remich, Oakton Community College

Beware! Reading Martha Maxwell's book, Improving Student Learning Skills, may be hazardous! After diving into this book, you may not surface. Your mind will fill with her observations, strategies, and resources. You may escape to the nearest library to pursue further research. Or you may stay awake at night as you contemplate plans to improve student learning. Reading Maxwell's work will prompt you to reflect on your work and stimulate reflection and insight. Heed my warning, but by all means read on!

Maxwell's book is a new edition of her work that was previously published over 15 years ago. She states that her purpose is "to address the state of the art of learning assistance and developmental education programs in the 90s" (p.v). Each of the thirteen chapters provides relevant history, research, and model practices that will be extremely valuable to those concerned with learning in higher education today.

In the first chapter, which sets the context for the book, Maxwell defines terms, presents an integrated model of learning assistance, and traces the roots of college skills programs. She describes the 1980s as an era when "developmental education came out of the closet and began to change for the better" (p. 18). In the face of present challenges—financial cuts, pressures to relegate developmental programs to community colleges, and gaps in high school to college learning—readers will be motivated by Maxwell's outlook. The emergence of professionalism and research documenting program effectiveness set a positive context for the future of learning assistance.

The book's subsequent twelve chapters present concepts and strategies learned from past mistakes and successes. Readers may choose to read the book from start to finish or select chapters that meet their needs. Chapter two on diagnosing skills difficulties includes balanced discussions of issues, e.g., mandatory vs. voluntary and credit vs. non-credit courses, and presents an interesting chart which compares the learning specialist's diagnosis with the student's self assessment. Four chapters focus on program development and management. Learning Center administrators will find numerous insights on tutoring programs, creating a center, problems associated with learning services, and evaluation. A chapter on teaching strategies for high-risk students precedes sections devoted to specific disciplines. Chapters on writing and English as a second language, reading, study skills,

math, and science examine history, trends, problems, and approaches specific to teaching and learning in each area. An extensive appendix supplements the text.

One strength of Maxwell's book is its readability. The writing style is conversational, and at times even chatty as Maxwell intersperses anecdotes from her own and others' experiences. Readers won't feel like they are reading heavy research, yet they will reap its benefits. Chapter headings, enumerated lists, and diagrams are reader friendly features that make it possible to scan for information and read selectively. Visual learners will particularly like the flow charts such as those depicting the studying of physics, learning center communications, and factors leading to help seeking.

A second strength of Maxwell's work is its appeal to a wide audience. While much of the content addresses the at-risk student population, Maxwell also includes material that greatly broadens the scope of developmental education. Sections on TA training, faculty outreach strategies, and services for graduate admission exams demonstrate the potential to expand services. Maxwell advises that

> ... the learning center assumes a preventive role and attempts to make the campus academic environment more conducive to student success, rather than limiting the functions to serving the victims of poor teaching, unrealistically difficult examinations and unreasonable faculty expectations. (p. 87)

Personnel from two-year open admissions colleges to four-year selective institutions will find relevant research and models. Administrators, instructors, learning specialists, and tutors will find useful references. Some material is appropriate for student eyes. For example, a concept map which analyzes the task of reading science texts could generate motivation and lively discussion in a study skills class or reading workshop.

A third strength is the resources Maxwell provides making the book a catalyst for future research and practice. Citations of research are woven through each chapter and are easily accessible when preceded by the phrase "for further information on _____ you will want to read _____". The only way to make these citations more useful would be hot-link buttons for immediate access! Numerous model programs are described and referenced. Do you need ideas for a paired reading course, objectives for your learning center or study strategies beyond SQ3R? These and many more concrete ideas abound in Maxwell's book. The appendix alone is worthwhile with its useful lists for professional organizations, reading and study skills books, tutoring resources, standardized tests ... and more!

Perhaps what makes this book most valuable is that it promotes critical thinking and reflection about our profession and potential to enhance student learning. Maxwell does not simply provide recipes to follow. She gives the pros and cons of issues plus the successes and pitfalls of strategies that allow readers to decide how to adapt suggestions to their own settings.

So beware! Reading Maxwell's book may lead to harder work ... **if that's possible**! But do dive into this book, and please rise to the surface because as Maxwell concludes

> ... there are no panaceas in higher education. Good teaching is, and always will be, a labor intensive, time-consuming, and highly personalized activity. (p. 329).

Robin Remich *is the STEPS Program Coordinator in Instructional Support Services at Oakton Community College.*

Library Subscription for *The Learning Assistance Review*

The Learning Assistance Review is a publication of the Midwest College Learning Association (MCLCA). It is published twice a year, in the fall and spring.

The journal seeks to expand and disseminate knowledge about learning centers and to foster communication among learning center professionals. Its audience includes learning center administrators, teaching staff, and tutors as well as other faculty and administrators across the curriculum who are interested in improving the learning skills of postsecondary students.

If you would like an annual subscription to The Learning Assistance Review, please mail or fax, on institutional letterhead, your name, address, telephone number, fax number and e-mail address. Please include a check or P.O. number for invoicing. Institutional subscription rates are $25.00. Send your requests to:

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PUBLICATION GUIDELINES

As an official publication of the Midwest College Learning Center Association, The Learning Assistance Review seeks to expand and disseminate knowledge about learning centers and to foster communication among learning center professionals. Its audience includes learning center administrators, teaching staff and tutors as well as other faculty and administrators across the curriculum who are interested in improving the learning skills of postsecondary students.

The journal aims to publish scholarly articles and reviews that address issues of interest to a broad range of learning center professionals. Primary consideration will be given to articles about program design and evaluation, classroom-based research, the application of theory and research to practice, innovative teaching strategies, student assessment, and other topics that bridge gaps within our diverse discipline.

1. Prepare a manuscript that is approximately 12 to 15 pages in length and includes an introduction, bibliography, and subheadings throughout the text.

2. Include an abstract of 100 words or less that clearly describes the focus of your paper and summarizes its contents.

3. Type the text with double spacing and number the pages. Follow APA style (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 4th edition, 1994).

4. Include your name, title, address, institutional affiliation and telephone number along with the title of the article on a separate cover sheet; the manuscript pages should include a running title at the top of each page with no additional identifying information.

5. Submit all tables or charts camera ready on separate pages.

6. Do not send manuscripts that are under consideration or have been published elsewhere.

7. Send three copies of your manuscript to the following address: Dr. Nancy Bornstein, Co-Editor, The Learning Assistance Review, Alverno College, P.O. Box 343922, Milwaukee, WI 53234-3922.

You will receive a letter of acknowledgment that your manuscript has been received. The review process will then take approximately three to six weeks at which time you will receive further notification related to your work. If your manuscript is accepted for publication, a computer disk will be requested.

MCLCA MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

What is MCLCA?

The Midwest College Learning Center Association (MCLCA) is a regional organization dedicated to promoting excellence among learning center personnel in 12 midwestern states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. MCLCA defines a learning center as a place where all students, from entering freshmen to graduate and professional school students, can be taught to become more efficient and effective learners.

What Does MCLCA Do?

The MCLCA Constitution identifies the following objectives for the organization:

- To promote professional standards for learning centers through education, curriculum design, research, and evaluation.
- To promote support for learning centers by acting on issues affecting learning assistance programs.
- To assist in the development of new learning centers.
- To assist in the professional development of personnel in learning assistance programs by providing opportunities for sharing professional methods, techniques, and strategies.
- To provide an annual conference for the exchange of ideas, methods, and expertise in learning assistance programs.
- To publish educational information and research in the field.
- To develop and expand a communications network among learning assistance professionals.
- To coordinate efforts with similar professional groups.

How Can I Participate?

The MCLCA Executive Board is anxious to involve as many learning center professionals as possible in achieving its objectives and meeting our mutual needs. Therefore, we invite you to become a member of the Midwest College Learning Center Association. The membership year extends from October 1 through September 30, and annual dues are $40.00. Membership includes the MCLCA Newsletter and The Learning Assistance Review, discounted registration for the annual MCLCA Conference, workshops, in-service events, and announcements regarding upcoming MCLCA activities. We look forward to having you as an active member of our growing organization.

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MCLCA Membership Application

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