Holistic Support that Promotes Student Learning

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For decades. the cost of serving college students, from community colleges to Ivy League institutions, has been a barrier that has blocked access for many who want an education. With a recent massification effort aimed at producing more college graduates for the workplace, the enrollment numbers have increased and student debt load has become a real concern. Tuition costs are often perceived as the primary factor that prevents students from graduating, particularly when they struggle to be successful early in their college years.

Vermont's Landmark College since 1985 has been exclusively serving students with learning disabilities, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity/Disorder and other diagnosed disabilities, and it too has felt the economic pressure of tuition costs, at times even topping the list of most expensive private colleges in the country. Landmark College serves one population of underprepared students; however, there are other reasons that students may go to college without the necessary skills to realize their full potential- or indeed, stay to finish. This diversity of learners now includes: first-generation college students (whose parents never enrolled in higher education), ESL students, adult learners and veterans returning to college, and those with psychological challenges, to name a few.

We know that lack of college-preparedness, whatever the cause, often expands a student's college stay, which drives up the cost of their education. Once identified, student challenges can be effectively addressed using a holistic and collaborative approach. The expense of an education, while often tagged as the primary barrier, is not necessarily the sole factor that impedes academic success.

Barriers to student success are complex and overcoming them must involve first assessing and then addressing the needs of the learner. This process can most successfully happen with a holistic approach; students are best served when they are placed in the center of multiple existing campus services. This model works especially well because teachers and other professionals share an understanding of common barriers. Not to be undervalued, this approach allows for greater success in assessing current student challenges, determining the best resources and providing continued academic support.

We are not proposing curricular or programmatic change as the "student-centered" models often promote. Instead, we are suggesting a different way of considering a student's academic challenges, as well as examining how existing services can work together to benefit the student.

Understanding what college students need in various learning environments will help those who work with them to identify the barriers that they face. Because effective learning is complex, it requires more than simply attaining academic skills. It is easy to become bogged down in thinking that if a student is struggling academically, it must be a skill-acquisition issue, but there are three other critical areas that can be recognized in the learning process. We have

developed a framework that identifies the four main domains that all students must manage in order to be academically successful, and which professionals can use in a collaborative and holistic process with struggling students.

Within the first year of college, it is especially important for students to grow in the following four areas: the attainment of academic skills, the development of social and emotional maturity, the regulation of self, and the ability to activate and maintain motivation.

Figure 1: The Four Domains of Learning
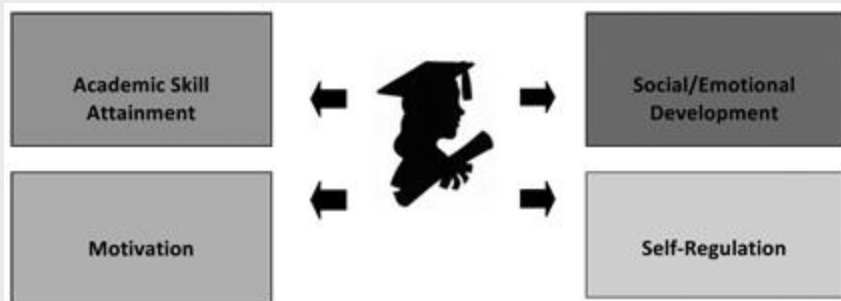
Ideally, learners must have adequate control over all four areas in order to perceive, process and express their understanding of the complex new content presented in college classes. Students, especially those who are underprepared, may require support in one or more domains, and in order for professionals to offer the needed support, it is necessary to identify the area(s) in which the student is challenged. For example, is this student capable during class, but not turning in any work? If so, challenges with self-regulation, such as planning and prioritizing, should be considered. Once determined, collaborating and communicating across existing campus resources becomes paramount, for example, a homework support setting, coaching services or working in groups with peers will be of benefit.

This simple framework illustrates both the spoken and frequently unspoken barriers that a student may be grappling with, particularly during the first year in college. Although each domain is independently distinguishable, they more commonly overlap in both negative and positive ways. For example, skill attainment is often driven by motivation, and motivation is often related to a social and/or emotional factor. Students who find themselves unable to regulate these areas independently will require concerted support from various resources on campus. Once the underlying barrier is addressed, skill attainment will more readily occur. If all professionals, such as faculty, advisors, resident deans, academic support personnel and counseling staff, understand the significance of these four domains, and can collaborate meaningfully, there will be greater efficiency in pinpointing the challenging areas and providing targeted on-going support.

The Four Domains of Learning Explained

In the area of academic skill attainment, a range of skills is required of students. In many ways, this area is the most easily recognized area of challenge, because students will typically ask for help with reading, writing and thinking. They want help understanding the content being covered in class or what is required of them to be successful in the course, and will pose questions like, "*Could you explain this content in more detail*? Or "*In what style would you like this paper written?*" These clearly represent academic skills and can be addressed during an office hour visit, in the academic support center on campus, or even with peer support.

While skill-based academic barriers are often transparent, social and emotional ones tend to be less obvious to both the learner and those working with him or her. As a result, a challenge in this domain is often overlooked (by the professional) or avoided (by the student) in an academic setting. This area of development dictates the emotional state held by the learner toward a particular academic task at hand. For example, a student who had a negative past experience with a topic or subject area may negatively interfere with skill acquisition during new experiences with that topic or subject. This barrier may be masked, or deflected by the student and can seem to be projected on to the teacher or an assignment; it can allow students to set themselves up for failure. For instance, instead of understanding that a past failure in math contributes to thinking that one will always be a poor math student, the learner may say, *"This class (or teacher) is awful,"* or *"this assignment is ridiculous."* This critical domain can be thought of as the "elephant in the room" because it is often unspoken or left unaddressed. It is, therefore, important to realize that there is always an emotional component to learning. Advisors, counselors and faculty can work in concert to provide the appropriate support, which will usually involve helping the student to recognize his or her emotional connection to the subject or assignment.

Our emotions are not only linked to our overall perception of ourselves as learners, but they will also affect our level of motivation to activate learning. Low levels of student engagement are commonly expressed by teachers as those learners being "unmotivated." Increasing numbers of faculty talk about students' "lack of interest" in class or assigned work, and they can feel as if their students need to be entertained in order to get motivated. But motivation is more complex than levels of participation. Being motivated to learn is directly linked to our ability to comprehend the concepts, and to understand the relevance of learning the content when it is placed in a larger context. Students are not afraid to claim they are not motivated in a particular class, and may even blame the teacher with statements like, *"This teacher is so boring."* It is easy for faculty and advisors to focus energy on defending the work of the teacher, whereas supporting the student by strengthening comprehension and relevance of the material individually or in small groups may be more productive. In addition, helping students set both personal and academic goals can enhance motivation, especially at the freshman level; this productive activity can occur cross-departmentally with advisors, counselors and of course instructors.

Lastly, challenges within the domain of self-regulation can be quite common among first-year college students, and if not addressed, can become a formidable barrier to success. The support offered must, therefore, include comprehensive collaboration across campus resources within the academic and residential program. The profound nature of this barrier encompasses the inability to plan, organize, prioritize and exercise will power to complete tasks. This can be the result of a lack of independent practice while living at home prior to college, or more seriously, the challenge of managing these executive skills as the result of Attention Deficit Disorder. Added to the difficulty in assessing this area is the fact that many students struggling within this domain will not come to class regularly and then find themselves falling behind to such an extent that it is impossible to catch up. Professionals need to identify these students early, because it can quickly become too late to help them with the skills they need to be successful. Even if they attend class regularly, they may have trouble completing assignments and handing work in on time. Coaching services, resident deans, academic support staff and advisors on campus represent resources for both the student as well as the classroom teacher. Providing structured support in the areas of breaking down complex assignments and time management strategies including use of a planner/assignment book are beneficial to this student. Of all the barriers to academic success, this represents the most urgent of the four domains because it has a profound effect on overall performance.

Addressing Underprepared Learners

As campuses enroll an increasingly diverse set of learners, the issues surrounding underprepared students must be addressed. Coupling the budgetary constraints currently plaguing colleges with the expense of delivering the programming that academically challenged students need—and considering the ensuing retention issues that colleges face—makes it time to support new thinking. Once a student is admitted, colleges and universities are called upon to fully meet her where she is academically. With targeted ongoing support, both the student and the institution can benefit, because underprepared students can more quickly reach their academic goals, thereby reducing cost, and the retention rate of all students should increase. Postsecondary educators today are in a position to make a real shift that meets the needs of current students. By fully utilizing existing campus resources within a collaborative system, the possibility of academic success that all students strive for can be reached.

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