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THE READING/WRITING LAB:
A FIRST-AID STATION
FOR EVERY SCHOOL

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In the fall of 1981, Loretta (real student, but fictitious name) came to the University of Albuquerque as a freshman from nearby Zuni Pueblo. Her placement procedure included the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form C, and an essay on the assigned topic, "My Worries About College." Reading scores indicated a vocabulary level of 8.7 and a comprehension level of 9.2. Her placement essay opening paragraph read as follows: "One big problem and worry I'am up against is money. By money, I mean will I have enough and will it cover my cost of schooling. I know that everything is so high price and that concern me even more."

By the second week in December, Loretta's reading scores showed 11.3 vocabulary and a 13.5 comprehension level. Her English class essay for the week opened with--

"Every day I encounter surprising events that add to my happiness. Even a small, unimportant encounter with an unfamiliar dog can bring me happiness. However, my happiness is not complete. For the time being, the ways to increase my happiness would include owning a car, having a regular income, and being a part of my boyfriend's activities."

Loretta was not nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1981, but she was on her way toward some mainstream freshman courses.

Having entered the University under its policy of open admission, Loretta spent one full semester in non-credit basic skills classes: English, math, speech, and logic. In her second semester, she had two non-credit refresher courses (English and algebra) and two regular freshman courses. Without a policy of open admission, Loretta would never have been able to seek a post-secondary education. Without the academic support services available, she would not have survived.

The academic support services at the University of Albuquerque include a tutoring center and reading/writing lab. Both are located in the campus building where all basic skills and most freshman core classes meet. The tutor-

ing center is staffed by professional and peer tutors whose majors include most of the disciplines offered at the University. Two specialists in reading and writing (a Ph.D and an M.A.) operate the reading/writing lab with the help of one part-time professional tutor (Ph.D) and one undergraduate peer tutor.

We first met Loretta when she came for the general lab introduction with her English 100 class during the first week of the semester. Like most of her basic skills classmates, she was a victim of low income background, academic underpreparation, low achievement, and cultural or linguistic isolation. A higher education had never been included in her earlier ambitions, and she had serious doubts about her ability to handle the challenge. As with all lab introductions, the reading specialist spent the first half hour assuring the students that, with lab assistance, they would be successful--if they spent all their free time in the lab. We gave each student his/her individual reading program, a two-page study plan, locating all of the material available in the lab so that no student need be lost. We check levels and materials for initial remediation based upon Nelson-Denny reading test scores and add to these as each student progresses through the semester.

The first lab session is always chaotic because we are forced to race through very complex logistics: the folders, the time sheets for logging the hours, work sheets for the many programs, operation of hardware, manipulation of software, folder file location, and so forth. The end of Loretta's lab introduction prompted her to ask, as they all do, "Do you really expect us to remember all this?" Our reply is always the same--"When you come in tomorrow--and you'd better come in tomorrow--we'll go through it with you individually. With this introduction, you will at least, perhaps, be able to find the lab and your folder."

Loretta returned the following day and we began working our minor miracles with the controlled reader and with a filmstrip vocabulary program which uses new terms in contextual settings. Our first miracle was Loretta's mastery of the operation of the controlled reader after 60 minutes of instruction. The miracle of the filmstrip machine had to wait for the third visit.

By the end of the second week, the 243 students who crowded into our 45' by 24' operation that semester were able to locate most of the material they needed and were

able to manipulate most machines without inflicting serious damage. During that second week, Loretta arrived with her first graded composition and her essay analysis sheet. (See sample) Her first expository effort contained 11 fragments, 13 agreement problems, and 7 run-on sentences, in addition to several other "minor" problems. Loretta was devastated and ready to return to her Pueblo. We sat together over many cups of coffee and tackled the fragment problem on a one-to-one basis. Loretta reinforced the individual help by reviewing filmstrips on fragment in the writing skills programs. In her second composition, the agreement problems were blatant, but she had no fragments at all. Her reaction? "I guess I can learn."

Each week we solved a different writing problem in much the same manner. Between essays, Loretta pushed herself through the reading program. Because no appointments are necessary to use the lab, she simply moved in, bookbag and baggage. No material in the lab is marked by grade level, so she never knew that we had started her in fifth-grade level material to insure her meeting with instant success. The success provided Loretta with the immediate reinforcement needed to hold her to the task of reading improvement. Not much else was required for the staff to do. For most of these students, entering the University with fully developed oral vocabularies and many life experiences, the procedure to improving reading abilities is mostly to read, read, read. The staff provides the intriguing materials and machines, the warm atmosphere, and the encouragement. The students do the rest.

At mid-term, Loretta was required to read and report on a "good" novel for her English class. Her only previous exposures to fiction were Harlequin and Silhouette Romances. We recommended Steinbeck's The Pearl, one of hundreds of paperback novels donated to the lab by a grateful faculty and student organizations. Loretta was reluctant but two weeks later returned the book with the comment, "It's the best book I ever read."

We lost a few students that fall, but most stayed with us, having found a home away from the dorm. They draped themselves over our tables to study together, isolated themselves in corners to use machines, lolled on our sofas, read everything on the University announcement board checked out hundreds of texts and novels, devoured short stories from the filing cabinet collection, used lab time to arrange social engagements, were recruited for student government activities, drank thousands of cups of coffee,

and consumed hundreds of bags of popcorn from our hot air popper. Some of them were forced to leave their kids and dogs for us to babysit, only in emergencies, while they went to class. And they learned and found they were able to succeed.

We have been inspiring underprepared students like Loretta since we opened the tutoring center and labs in January, 1980. While the missions and ideals of this small, private college have changed over the last two years, the support personnel have maintained their focus--the individual needs of the students. Although the University's open admission policy is no longer in effect in this fall's catalog, students with specific areas of weakness (reading, writing, math) can be admitted provisionally into an eight week (summer) or 16-week (fall) program of intensive non-credit classes in math, science, philosophy, and written language. They are admitted to regular freshman classes based upon evaluations at the end of each program. The tutoring center and lab are still used extensively by these mostly minority students, as well as by all University students who seek assistance in specific areas such as research formats. For all, personnel help is at hand immediately whenever difficulties are encountered.

The use of the lab varies with enrollment, but the figures below, obtained from Title III quarterly reports for 1983, demonstrate how well the small staff serves many students for many hours.

<u>Dates</u>	<u>Nos. of Students</u>	<u>Nos. of Hours</u>
Jan.-Mar. 1983	154	2198
Apr.-June 1983	156	2583
July-Sept. 1983	241	3539
Oct.-Dec. 1983	172	2821

Do all of our lab students graduate? No, but many have and more will. Are all of them still in school? No. Most are, but some are in military or civil service occupations whose entry exams they could not have read, let alone passed, before they came to us. Three of our 1980 coffee drinkers are honor students in the bilingual education program and will graduate in May, 1985, as elementary teachers. One of our 1981 popcorn snackers earned a national science scholarship. Two of our 1982 sofa sprawlers are starring in the current theatre department production. One of our 1980 table drapers is earning a living as an artist of Acoma

Pueblo designs. One-third of last year's Who's Who nominees had spent a semester or more in the reading/writing lab. And Loretta? She graduated in the summer of 1984 with an Associate of Science degree in Radiography and has returned to the Zuni Pueblo to help her people.

We who work in the academic support services at the University of Albuquerque do not claim to have solved all of the problems of high-risk learners, but we do allege that without the availability of the reading/writing lab and its staff, most of our entering freshmen would not meet with success and would not continue beyond their first semester. Capable learners would have no organized program for refining their reading, writing, and research skills to higher levels of proficiency. Where else can students who are language-handicapped find someone to read to them or with whom they can "brainstorm" assignments? Where else can a student flop on a couch, munch on popcorn, become engrossed in Wuthering Heights, and have an opportunity afterwards to talk with someone who also loves Emily Bronte? We believe that our system would work anywhere--even at the secondary and elementary levels. Of course, larger schools would require larger facilities and staff, but they would prove no more expensive than the current, often unsuccessful, attempts to remedy the weaknesses in written language abilities that are plaguing our education system. A reading/writing lab in every school, where learners may drop in at any time, might be a most provident alternative for teachers who simply do not have the time for learners who require intensive individual attention. We recommend a reading/writing lab as a busy first-aid station which can provide long-term cures, as well as band-aids.

Sources of Materials

The Singer Company
Rochester, NY 14603

Arista Corp.
P.O.Box 6146
Concord, CA 94524

Dowling's Inc.
3017 N. Stiles
Okla. City, OK 73105

Eye Gate Media, Inc.
146-01 Archer Ave.
Jamaica, NY 11435

Learning Arts
P. O. Box 179
Wichita, KS 67201

Barnell Loft, Ltd.
958 Church St.
Baldwin, NY 11510

Sci. Res. Assoc.
155 N. Wacker Dr.
Chicago, IL 60606

Readers Digest Serv.
Educational Div.
Pleasantville, NY 10570

