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SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING CENTERS

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It should be quite clear from the research evidence that successful students tend to plan their work carefully, think ahead, are conscientious, independent, self-confident and recognize the importance of finding suitable conditions for effective study (Entwistle and Entwistle, 1970). Being able to organize, having a good self-image and being flexible are most important traits for students to have. For students that are handicapped in various ways, there is hope. Students can learn academic skills, if they have a good teacher and work to help themselves.

Self-image is a most important characteristic, and superior students have a good feeling about themselves and their work. The concept of self-image is also an important aspect of one's mental health. Healthy people like themselves and find it easy to like others. Underdeveloped students will have traits relating to poor mental health, but these traits can be reversed with the help of a good instructor and some rewarding educational experiences. This will take time. There are no simple solutions.

Teachers should be aware of the research literature that indicates instructing in remedial study skills can improve grades. Only professional study skills people with well developed programs can help. There are many non-effective programs operating in higher education, particularly in the two-year institutions of higher learning.

Individuals involved with study skills courses should know the characteristics of underachieving students and what the research literature says about helping these unique students. It is a fact that many persons charged with the responsibility to administer programs for the underdeveloped are not familiar with the research literature. They do not know what works and what does not work for underdeveloped, high risk students. The fact is that many people engaged with study skills and remedial courses have not read any research literature.

Many administrators do not understand that responsible professionals are required to staff study skills courses. There should be a strong remedial program in every institution of higher education that has an open door admission policy. Study skills training should be taught in conjunction with remedial courses such as reading, if academic performance is to be improved. Administrators should seek the most qualified personnel available to conduct remedial/study skills courses, if they expect to demonstrate the effectiveness of such programs. Unqualified staff members and student tutors cannot significantly help high risk students achieve academic success. A concentrated remedial program staffed with professional personnel

knowledgeable of diagnostic instruments and evaluation procedures are required; remedial programs that do not have qualified professionals are useless according to previous research. Administrators with incompetent personnel should not attempt to deal with high risk students, nor should they make claims of having study laboratories or remedial programs. Academic deceit by administrative charlatans does not help students to graduate; moreover, this behavior by administrators attempts to present shallow, non-effective programs as worthy for student consumption. Such misrepresentation is a waste of money, and violates principles of sound scholarship. Administrators operating remedial programs with no substantive evidence of student progress are derelict in accomplishing institutional goals.

It is recommended that personnel working in study skills laboratories read the literature describing the characteristics of high risk students. Teachers and administrators may not understand that they may be dealing with students who are handicapped in many ways. The high risk student will probably lack self-confidence to do academic work, have low self-esteem and demonstrate frustration while attempting to accomplish tasks too difficult to master. Research with high risk students has demonstrated that improvement may enable the student to graduate, but those who start with relatively higher ability measures are most likely to show the greatest improvement. (Pressey, 1928; Maxwell, 1963 and Tresselt, 1966).

Based on the research, colleges and universities should screen their students and conduct a diagnostic profile for each high risk student entering. Specific remedial treatments should be attempted. Research has indicated that high risk students can be helped to obtain better grades than what has been predicted for them. (Maxwell, 1963; McConihe, et al., 1964; Egeland, et al., 1970; Christ, 1970; Miller and Stillwagon, 1970; Pepper, 1970; Kling, 1972 and Shaffer, 1973). This approach would help the high risk student attempting to earn a degree, and it would lower the attrition rate for colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education in the United States need students to function. Making a concerted effort to retain those freshmen that enter higher education will be reflected in larger enrollments. This benefit should be of particular interest to administrators within higher education, because there will be increased competition for students in the future. Those institutions that open their doors to all students and can demonstrate ways to retain their freshmen until graduation will be considered successful. Under the influence of an egalitarian philosophy, numerous institutions of higher education in the United States welcome all types of students. Those institutions that do not employ professionals to make a proper attempt at upgrading academic skills are being dishonest.

Smith, et al. (1975) did a comprehensive survey of learning centers (reading and study skills programs) in the United States during the fall of 1974, which, they said, had never been accomplished before. The initial survey instrument consisted of 70 questions on administration, budget, staffing, services, facilities, and materials. On October 1, 1974, the survey

questionnaire was mailed to the 3,389 campuses of all 2,783 accredited colleges and universities listed in the 1972-73 and 1973-74 Educational Directory. Of the surveys mailed, 1,258 (38%) were completed and returned. Of all colleges responding to the survey, 61% indicated plans to develop a learning center within the next two years. Seventy-eight percent of all two-year colleges reported having centers, compared with 57% of post-graduate institutions and 43% of four-year colleges. It is interesting to know that 57% of all centers became operational after 1970, and a mere 10% existed before 1960; 61% of all centers before that date were in post-graduate institutions.

The administration of learning centers is a subject of concern. No clearly established pattern of administrative responsibility emerged from the Smith, et al. (1975) report. Learning centers in two-year colleges tend to be administered more frequently by English departments. Centers in four-year colleges and universities tend to be administered by Departments of Education or Counseling. English departments administer the highest percentage (23%) of the study skills centers. Two-year colleges tend to have staff with English degrees in their learning centers, while four-year and post-graduate institutions tend to have staff with degrees in educational psychology and counseling. The smaller the college the more likely its center would be administered by an English department and have a staff with English degrees. The larger the institution the more likely it would have a center administered by education or counseling and have a staff with degrees in those areas (Smith, et al., 1975).

The results of the Smith, et al. (1975) report indicate there is a heterogeneous mixture of disciplines involved with learning skills programs (English, Education and Psychology). Through this mixture there are probably different approaches and methodologies being used to treat the high risk students. Those involved with study skills programs should be aware of the research literature, but unfortunately there are many teachers that are unaware of the unique problems high risk students have. Many of the people teaching study skills courses do not have formal training with study skills strategies. Most study skills teachers learn while on the job, through a trial and error method. This may be a good way to learn, but it is difficult for the students that may or may not be helped while someone is learning with them. High risk students need professional attention, not practice teachers.

Some methods of good study are discovered by mere chance, others through experiments made by individuals in an effort at getting as much done as possible within the briefest span of time, and others are the result of thorough scientific research (Poulsen, 1969). The scientific method offers clues that can be used to improve our technique within certain bounds. Sten C. Poulsen (1969), a Danish study methods researcher, reviewed all the reports on study methods listed in *Psychological Abstracts* from 1927 to 1967 and concluded there were numerous weak research designs and poor studies. Poulsen (1969) said we need more research on study methods, and the research needs to investigate the amount of time students spend on different activities. Poulsen (1969) also noted that unless systematically

exposed to external influence, students do not change their mode of working to any great extent.

Those involved with study skills courses would be doing a service to their cause if they could demonstrate that their efforts do make a difference in helping students. Too often a treatment is applied with no follow-up done to determine if the treatment helped. Knowing what strategies work with different types of students is useful to the professional. Study courses must be tailored to individual needs; diagnostic examinations are required to map an individualized plan for help. Gladstein (1963) claimed to find evidence that a model of good study behavior can be applied to each student on an individualized basis. One must consider personality differences, ability and past achievements (Gladstein, 1963).

Knowing what has helped students can be used to project programs and plan for the future. Good study skills and remedial programs such as reading are expensive to maintain. Qualified professionals are in demand and staff personnel are required to sustain an active learning center.

The best approach for individuals getting started in the area of study skills is to read and understand the research literature. Having a knowledge of the research literature is necessary for a basic understanding of the problems high risk students have. High risk or underdeveloped students are handicapped in many ways. Students need to understand their problems. Teachers must also understand the problem and be able to offer help.

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