

"ACCESS": Retaining Underprepared College Freshmen through Coordinated Instruction in Literacy Skills and General Education

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Substantial research and common sense indicate that low persistence and graduation rates are the natural consequence of academic underpreparation among minority and disadvantaged students. Although specially admitted students generally are screened for motivation and aptitude, they frequently lack sophisticated ability to apply their natural talents. Bright minority students often come to the university, do poorly in their first semesters, grow discouraged, and disappear. Nearly three years ago, recognizing this problem, a group of San Diego State University faculty and administrators initiated "ACCESS"—"Advising—Counselling—Coordinated English Skills—Support." Jointly sponsored by the Educational Opportunity Program, The Academic Skills Center and the Department of English and Comparative Literature, ACCESS provides a comprehensive program of freshman services aimed at increasing retention among minority and disadvantaged students by increasing their literacy skills and by training them in the full range of academic survival skills. In effect, ACCESS creates a "bridge" year between high school graduation and full exposure to the college curriculum, compensating for students' academic underpreparation while orienting them to the college milieu.

The centerpiece in ACCESS, the Coordinated English Skills program, recently was included in the National Directory of Exemplary Developmental Programs. Coordinated English Skills matches courses from the regular general education curriculum with reading and writing courses offered by the Academic Skills Center and the English Department. In the program, students learn to read and write effectively by mastering their general education texts and by elaborating issues and themes raised in general education classes.

All EOP students are encouraged to participate in the program, and approximately 80% of EOP's entering freshmen do enroll in course "packages." The students identified as "high risk" candidates—those whose low high school grades and substandard test scores suggest high risk of failure and eventual disqualification—are required to participate. The lowest five percent of EOP's entering freshman class is admitted to the university contingent upon participation in ACCESS.

Measuring the program's success against figures from preceding years, we discover that in its pilot semester, the Fall of 1982, ACCESS cut by more than fifty percent the number of EOP freshmen placed on academic probation. ACCESS also increased the number of students who returned for a second semester and went on to complete their freshman years. Preliminary results from a longitudinal study indicate that more than sixty per cent of the students who participated in the pilot semester are still enrolled at San Diego State University or some other four-year institution. Most importantly, the encouraging performance of the pilot group has given rise to the hope that such an immediate interventive program will result in greater persistence and graduation rates among this group and others that have followed them.

The ACCESS program's design rests on a carefully considered, comprehensive definition of "underpreparation." We do not use the term "underprepared" simply as the latest euphemism for students with marked deficiencies in basic skills; instead, our experience leads us to define underpreparation as a syndrome of academic and cultural handicaps. Although many college students need to develop reading, writing, and computation skills, we have found that teaching these skills in isolation does not effectively compensate for their lack of preparation. Moreover, the conventional wisdom implies that underpreparation signifies merely the lack of a specific body of knowledge commonly accepted as preparatory for college. That same wisdom suggests that acquisition of that knowledge constitutes fit remedy for underpreparation.

Our experience shows that underprepared students are not adequately skilled as pursuers of learning; they have not mastered the basics of efficient, autonomous learning. Successful, skilled learners would feel confident that, if they wanted to learn more about photosynthesis, they would know where and how to gather the information they needed. Even when they share the same intellectual gifts that skilled learners enjoy, underprepared learners do not share that same command of their resources. Deficiencies in an overall body of knowledge generally can be overcome by instruction, but those deficiencies are not easily overcome if students lack the skills or the methods for attaining mastery of the material. Lack of preparation pervades all phases of the learning process, but it often becomes visible only through poor academic performances.

Underpreparation frequently is disguised in strange, inconsistent classroom conduct or performance. EOP often gets calls or notes from instructors who are confused by our students' erratic performance. Typically the professor will remark that a student's attendance had been perfect, but he or she failed to show up for the midterm examination. Other professors tell us that some students have received consistently high grades on their daily or weekly assignments but have failed comprehensive final examinations. Most frequently, we hear professors comment on the discrepancy between the students' apparent efforts and

their results. One professor explained that several EOP students assiduously took notes on every word of every lecture, filling their notebooks from margin to margin with dense paragraphs and nearly perfect transcripts of the lecture materials; the professor then went on to express concern that, in their zeal, these students were capturing everything except the point. More than any other learning difficulty, we have found that underpreparation manifests itself in the inability to determine relative importance among ideas and a corollary tendency to assign equal importance to everything. Surely, none of these students could justly be accused of lack of motivation (a complaint frequently lodged against minority students), but the end product did not reflect the students' investment of effort. Because the end products—grades—determine the students' academic progress, students who exhibit these behaviors may not succeed in college. Through its comprehensive, coordinated approach, ACCESS tries to remedy the whole syndrome rather than offer a simple corrective for insufficient information.

Because we regard underpreparation as a syndrome, we believe that most skills courses and most remedial programs are limited by perimeters too narrowly drawn. We believe that teaching just reading, just writing, just study skills, or just coping skills without attention to the whole picture of the students' situations will not effect any lasting improvement in the students' skills or performance. Almost all remedial programs show decent growth rates by creating series of "Hawthorne effects," but sustained growth and improvement require focus on the student within his or her immediate academic context, complete with all its changing emotional and intellectual demands.

As program designers move from theory to practice, they must create programs which will produce efficient, autonomous learners. They must select instructors who can coach, guide, and counsel. Instructors must serve as resources for students rather than acting strictly as sources of information. Skills instructors should guide students toward significant discovery: For example, students as a rule do not need generalized lectures on sophisticated notetaking strategies; instead, they need to be guided through the experience of examining their notetaking styles, comparing their styles with their needs, and creating new techniques from the results of the comparison.

In order to serve as the kind of resource underprepared students need, skills instructors should have two tools they normally lack—information on the students' other courses and means for assessing the demands that those other courses place upon the students. The ACCESS program's strength derives in large part from the instructors' use of those tools. The program gives the instructors the information they need to develop curriculum which meets the students' needs at the moment and teaches students in one specific context skills they will need in future semesters when they are on their own.

The idea behind the Coordinated English Skills program is neither complex nor new. Many universities, including San Diego State University, have used the coordinated approach in inter-disciplinary and honors programs. ACCESS is unique, however, in its success with "high risk" students, and in its comprehensiveness. In its simplest terms, the program works by placing students in a suitable pair of writing and reading classes, and those students also take a general education class together. A graduate tutor assists in the skills class and attends the general education class with the students; the tutors then conduct study groups for the students, and study group attendance is mandatory. The reading and writing classes draw upon the general education lectures and textbooks, so that students learn skills by using real college materials, and they gain competitive advantage by practicing the skills which general education examinations will challenge. During the pilot semester, ACCESS concentrated on entry-level classes, but as ACCESS students have progressed through the general education sequence, we have tailored new, more sophisticated packages to suit their needs. The majority of packages have been organized around humanities and social science classes, but we have offered packages in the sciences, and we currently are experimenting with a package which coordinates writing and mathematics. Now completing its third year, the program has offered more than 100 packages and has served over 1500 students.

The reading and writing instructors have latitude to use general education materials in whatever ways they deem appropriate, but the coordinated approach is fairly strictly governed by the conventions in the humanities and social sciences: The general education professors are admonished to conduct business as usual, and the skills instructors are exhorted to adapt and enrich the general education curriculum. Rather than standardizing the skills curriculum, we have allowed the general education courses to dictate the substance and the methods in the reading and writing classes. In practice, the program delivers to each skills instructor a group of twenty-five students learning the same material and sharing the goal of doing well in one particular class. We do provide general guidelines for delivery of skills instruction, but the wide variety of demands in the general education classes makes standardization almost impossible. Most significantly, the variety of testing procedures in the different general education classes militates against standardization of skills instruction: Some professors still administer only multiple-choice tests while others insist on carefully written essay tests. That difference obviously implies vastly different approaches to mastery of the course materials in the different courses.

Skills instructors understand that their foremost obligation to their students is to improve their reading and writing skills. We do not expect that well-trained reading and writing specialists will abandon their specialties in the interest of becoming ersatz specialists in the humanities or social sciences; instead, we expect that they will use their expertise to

help students master general education material. For the most part, the skills instructors treat reading and writing as complementary arcs of the same circle, using highly refined versions of the SQ3R method or, in some cases, using highly sophisticated versions of the Language Experience approach. The materials, activities, and assignments derive their substance from the content of the general education courses. In the students' eyes, skills development appears both natural and necessary as they discover that their command of basic skills bears directly on their proficiency and performance in the general education courses.

Skills instructors generally assign reading and writing tasks to reinforce comprehension and command of general education material, but a representative sample of their assignments reflects the wide range of their concerns for specific literacy skills even in the context of content materials. For example, one instructor shows consistent concern for comprehension of text materials. In that professor's natural science writing class, students write short essays on solubility as a characteristic property and the conservation of mass as a law of nature. Other instructors focus on survey and summary skills: In the religious studies writing class, the professor asks students first to write on the organization and development of their textbooks; students then go on to write about the Hindu caste system, the four noble truths of Buddhism, and the human needs satisfied by all religions. Still other instructors focus on syntactic or rhetorical expertise: In the psychology writing class, students work primarily with sentence level mechanics using major concepts from psychology. In the mythology writing class, students learn paragraph and essay structures by formulating and defending theses based on information from the lectures. In some cases, instructors use writing assignments to encourage application of course material to everyday experience: In the sociology writing class, students learn about their own enculturation through their study of sociological concepts. Most of the skills instructors require daily lecture summaries, and most of them see significant gains in fluency as a result of regular summary writing.

As the program has evolved, it has increased its emphasis on reading skills. In the pilot semester, ACCESS offered only one reading development course, and the students in that course performed better than students who did not receive direct instruction in reading. In that pilot reading course, students learned and perfected each of the steps in the SQ3R reading method. They learned how to call upon background experience and develop familiarity with the text through extended surveys; they learned sophisticated decoding skills and discovery of sophisticated vocabulary in context; they learned advanced comprehension and inference skills using their text materials; and students learned to apply new information to familiar situations through integration of the writing process into regular textbook study. When materials were exceptionally difficult, abstract, or complex, students learned to schematize and

prepare flow charts which simplified the texts. In many cases, students discovered that rhetorical principles developed in their writing classes were being used by their textbook authors.

As a result of their reading instruction, students in the humanities package out-performed a similar group of students who had taken the course the previous year without the benefit of the supplemental reading and writing instruction. Fourteen of the twenty-two students enrolled in the course package received grades of C or better. More significantly, more than 65% of the students received A's or B's, and EOP students received the second and third highest grades on the first midterm, competing favorably against a total class population of 350. The whole group ended the course with an aggregate grade average of 2.3, an average identical to that for the whole class. Their performance is especially notable, because none of the students in the humanities package had entered the university with a TSWE score above 25.

Over the program's three year history, all ACCESS packages have generated student performances better than those recorded by EOP freshmen who did not have the benefit of ACCESS classes. Each year, ACCESS students' aggregate grade average has exceeded the average for all EOP. In the first year of the program, the GPA for all EOP students (including ACCESS participants) was 1.67; ACCESS participants, however, had a 1.97 average. In the years prior to development of ACCESS, EOP freshmen averaged 1.4. Because all skills classes are graded simply "credit" or "no credit," many students' GPA's were identical to their grades in the general education courses. For those students who took additional courses outside the packages, their grades in those extra classes generally were lower, but in the vast majority of cases, the students had performed satisfactorily in all their classes.

The academic probation rate among ACCESS students is significantly lower than the rate for EOP students who choose not to participate, and each year the ACCESS probation rate has grown closer to the rate among all freshmen. In the Fall of 1984, 97 students among the entering EOP freshman class chose not to take ACCESS classes; at the end of the fall semester, 57 of those 97 (58.7%) were placed on academic probation, and 16 of those students finished with grade averages of 0.00. By contrast, 66 of the 220 ACCESS participants (30%) were placed on probation, and only 11 had averages of 0.00. Also by way of contrast, the university estimates that about 20% of each freshman class finishes the first semester on probation. In general, we would like ACCESS students to perform comparably with their traditional counterparts. We would hope to see normal grade distributions in all the general education courses, and, in fact, in most courses we have seen natural bell curves. Still, as we perfect the program and grow more familiar with the intricacies of preparation for general education courses, we anticipate that the probation rate may actually fall below the comparable rate for all freshmen, and we hope to see ACCESS grade averages exceeding the averages for all freshmen.

Our experience suggests five crucial resources for implementation of a program like ACCESS.

First, the university faculty must include a cadre of dedicated, well-trained, well-skilled reading and writing specialists. The reading and writing faculty are the single greatest contributor to the program's success, contributing primarily on the strength of their intellectual capacity and their adaptability. These instructors must be facile enough in the reading and writing processes that they can adapt them to meet the demands of a wide variety of subjects. The skills instructors must also show a knack for quick and effective innovation; in some cases, they must be capable of developing and delivering curriculum materials and class activities on demand. We have found that the skills instructors must treat ACCESS as an affair of the heart. Their humane treatment of students has the same impact on students' performance that their instructional methods do.

Second, whenever a program addresses the needs of a specific population, there must be ways for program coordinators and counselors to advise that population about the program and its benefits. EOP has the advantage of employing six full-time counselors who specialize in working with minority and disadvantaged students. Those counselors' command of crisis intervention techniques and their skill in communicating with students helps students negotiate the difficult transition from high school to college, and the counselors' special skills help students clarify their values and expectations. Perhaps most importantly, the counselors help students identify with the academic and social standards in the program and in the university.

Third, the university community must include a population of capable and committed graduate students who can assist in reading and writing instruction. They must be willing to devote time and energy to attending general education classes and preparing materials for study group sessions. The program must pay these students a decent wage, and it must reward them with other perquisites, because they represent the crucial link between general education and the skills classes.

Fourth, there must be cooperation and collegial spirit among all the faculty who teach in the program. Although general education and skills instructors need not meet often, they must communicate openly when they do meet. General education instructors must be willing to supply skills instructors with book lists, syllabi, outlines of course materials, and other information which clarifies the themes in their courses and shows their expectations for students' preparation and performance. General education instructors also must help the skills teachers monitor students' progress through their courses, and the general education professors should be willing to offer advice and counsel about remedies for specific students' problems.

Finally, the university administration and the support staff must work in concert with the program director. They must share a sense of purpose and direction for the program, and they must work efficiently at taking care of administrative and logistical details.

As we have developed and refined ACCESS, we have found that nearly everyone wants to participate and cooperate, because the program clearly benefits everyone who gets involved with it. The students benefit from cultivating good skills and earning good grades. They form strong bonds with their classmates, and they develop strong support groups as they deal with the pressures of college life. The reading and writing instructors benefit from having concrete subject matter and substantive issues with which to work; they generally comment that they prefer dealing with course content to working with the traditional solipsistic or narcissistic topics that frequently dominate basic composition classes. The skills instructors gain both incentive and reassurance from their knowledge that they really are preparing students for academic success. They also avoid motivational and discipline problems, because students easily can see that their skill deficiencies bear directly on their academic performance.

The general education faculty benefit from working with groups of students who are well-prepared and responsive. One professor who has worked with the program since its inception recently commented in a meeting of department chairs and university administrators: "When I first began working with ACCESS I was skeptical at best. In my experience, EOP students always had clustered at the bottom of the grade curve, and they generally seemed alienated or frustrated. I have found, however, that ACCESS prepares and motivates them for success. Now, as a result of the program, they follow the same grade distribution that the rest of the class follows. Far more gratifyingly though, EOP students now regularly score the highest grades on my tests, and they consistently arrive in class well-prepared and ready to contribute. Not only have I abandoned my skepticism but I have come to prefer teaching ACCESS students because of their enthusiasm about my courses and about college."

Ultimately, the whole university benefits by attracting and retaining minority and disadvantaged students who successfully progress toward degrees. As a result of their successful experience in ACCESS, students develop self-esteem and great loyalty to the university. These students, in fact, help the university and special admissions programs fulfill their missions. These students discover and then demonstrate to their communities that higher education can still deliver on its promise as a means to upward social mobility.

