

Advising Underprepared Transfer Students: Integrating English Assessment and Academic Advising

Elizabeth J. Cooper and Johannah S. Franke, City University of New York

Academic advisors make important contributions to preventing the academic difficulties of underprepared transfer students through active cooperation with the English composition program. Joint efforts to get students evaluated and placed at the appropriate level of English composition instruction can encourage reading, writing, and critical thinking competencies that enhance students' performance in their other academic courses.

A striking trend on American campuses is the increased underpreparation of the college student population (Patrick, Furlow, & Donovan, 1988). Another noticeable trend is an increase in the enrollment of adults, women, minorities, persons with disabilities, part-time students, and other nontraditional students. These trends have caused colleges and universities to study, invent, revise, and expand advisement programs in the attempt to increase retention rates.

At the same time many more students than in the past encounter difficulties that may prevent them from continuing to graduation: discouragement, financial problems, and academic difficulty (Janasiewicz, 1987). Among these high-risk students, transfer students may be particularly at risk of academic difficulty for several reasons.

Despite the college-level experience transfer students have had, these students are frequently underprepared in such intellectual competencies as analytical reading, writing, and critical analysis (Handel & Muratore, 1988). A study of City University of New York (CUNY) Associate of Arts degree graduates transferring to four-year institutions showed just such a lack of preparation (Hamby, 1988). This lack of preparation leads to (a) an often immediate drop in grade point average (GPA), referred to as "transfer shock" (Zimmerman, 1981); (b) the appearance of more transfer than "regular" students on probation lists (Graham & Dallam, 1986); and (c) a decrease in persistence, especially in the first several semesters following transfer (Graham & Dallam, 1987).

Interacting with a concerned person who can offer practical guidance appears to help transfer students persist to graduation. A survey of stu-

dents who transferred from a community college to the California State system or to the University of California system (Hall, 1990) confirmed previous research that, in addition to self-motivation, the most important variables for maintaining student persistence were related to human interaction. One study of students transferring to the University of Alberta (Vaala, 1988) revealed that faculty members' interest and help in planning these students' programs were the most important aids to successful transfer. And a study of students at the University of Akron (Smith, 1983) concluded that, among other factors, improved counseling and advising services would have encouraged non-persisting students to remain in school.

A study at the University of Maryland-College Park focused on transfer students already in academic jeopardy. Those students were urged to meet with academic advisors twice, first to discuss reasons for difficulty and to draw up a written plan to address the problems and second to evaluate results. Of the 25% of those students who voluntarily attended two meetings, 49% were still enrolled and were off academic probation by the end of the following semester (Boyd & Counseling Center Retention Study Group, 1987). The weak point in this program is its voluntary nature, which seems to have allowed 75% of the target population to avoid this helpful counseling.

Other schools that have introduced so-called intrusive or intensive advising programs report success, or at least satisfaction, in spite of the time and effort such programs require (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984; Cellucci & Price, 1986; Gordon, 1987; Jenkins, Moore, & Cherry, 1981; Patrick et al., 1988; Sharkey et al., 1987; Taylor, 1987).

This article discusses an early intervention program at CUNY's Lehman College to help transfer students avoid future academic difficulty by becoming better prepared in fundamental intellectual competencies. The program requires that all entering transfer students demonstrate writing proficiency as soon as possible.

More than half of Lehman's undergraduate students enter as transfer students with as many

as 68 credits. The serious underpreparation of these students, particularly in writing, challenged Lehman to initiate its policy on writing proficiency. The students' lack of preparation for college-level writing stems from (a) the length of time they have been away from school; (b) their lack of experience with the conventions of the English language in an academic setting, including possible second language interference; (c) their general lack of aptitude for or interest in language learning; or (d) the quantity and quality of their previous writing instruction.

The program has two major activities: (a) composition assessment and placement and (b) academic advising. Success depends upon the cooperative efforts of the English composition program and the office of academic advising. A recent study of students enrolled at Lehman from 1984-1987 shows that 84% of those who passed the writing requirement during that time period had cumulative GPAs above 2.0 ($A = 4.0$). Of those students who failed to pass the writing requirement during that time, only 48% had cumulative GPAs above 2.0. (A No Credit grade, which takes the place of D and F in composition courses, has no negative effect on a student's GPA.) These statistics provide the rationale for Lehman's integrated assessment and advising strategy.

English Composition

Composition assessment and placement are important because students develop intellectual competencies as they study and practice writing. More specifically, composition courses greatly help prepare students for academic success because these courses require students to read, write, and think critically (Krashen, 1978). In this context, composition should be understood as more than a basic writing skill; it is the fundamental liberal art—a complex, imaginative activity in which the mind engages the world and creates meaning through language. Students in composition courses are taught to read, write, and analyze a variety of academic and non-academic discourse forms. They are taught to create their own understanding from and through the written word. At the same time students are taught to develop and organize their ideas on a variety of subjects for different audiences and purposes. So the writing assignments that form the core of a composition class offer students many opportunities to explore and appreciate higher order intellectual competencies.

In a four-year college, teachers of upper division courses, in particular, expect students to handle complex texts and to write competently.

For these reasons it is especially important for students transferring from community colleges to senior colleges, as most of Lehman's transfers do, to demonstrate their writing proficiency and for the senior colleges to evaluate this writing and to further develop their skills, if needed. Immediate assessment and placement is important because experience with transfers at CUNY tells us that many of them have taken a break between community and senior college, usually to work full-time. If they have used writing in their work at all, the forms and purposes of that writing were different from the demands of academic writing. Of those students who came directly to Lehman from another college, most had finished their writing courses much earlier and infrequently wrote afterwards, especially if they were in professional or technical programs.

So for Lehman, a four-year institution with so many of its upper division students having transferred in, the college is eager to assess transfer students' abilities to do the upper-level work and to provide the support, through appropriate instruction, that these students may need. When students transfer in, Lehman requires a writing examination to determine their level of proficiency, using the same examination that concludes the regular preparatory composition sequence at Lehman. Lehman also evaluates transfer students' previous courses in this determination process. Trained evaluators place those students who do not demonstrate writing proficiency in appropriate composition courses. Students must then enroll in an English course each semester until they demonstrate the proficiency the college requires of all students. This course requirement is necessary (and must be enforced) because students who most need writing instruction are often the ones who try to avoid it. Studies in writing anxiety (Daly, 1985) have shown that highly apprehensive students are less willing to enroll in writing-oriented courses because they have lower expectations of success and feel they have done less well in previous courses where writing was demanded. Many Lehman transfer students fit this profile, having been required to take basic writing skills courses at their community colleges.

Transfer students whose writing still reveals the need for "basic skills" preparation (below the level of standard "college-level" composition courses) are further assessed. Students whose

difficulties with English grammar and syntax appear to arise primarily from second-language interference are assessed in listening, grammar, and reading comprehension by specialists in English as a second language and placed accordingly. All of these students continue taking writing courses until they are proficient.

Advising

Administering this complex system of assessment and placement requires cooperation among many units of the college. Because it is important to get students into composition courses immediately, Lehman requires transfer students to have their writing assessed before or during their first semester.

If transfer students are accepted before registration begins, academic advisors provide information about Lehman's assessment testing and the writing proficiency necessary for academic success and send those students for assessment before registration. Otherwise this information is given at the first advisement session during registration, and students sign a contract agreeing to be assessed before enrolling for the following semester. Most students follow through on their contracts.

Academic advisors follow up by writing to students who fail to comply. Advisors use this opportunity to demonstrate "a caring attitude" (Ford & Ford, 1989). The students are notified that they must see an academic advisor as well as the director of the English composition program to register; from this letter they learn that without this advisement and assessment the college will not permit them to register. Most students request advisement appointments, and these meetings with an academic advisor and a program administrator provide further opportunities to help the students understand the goals of Lehman's writing requirement. In addition, consultation between academic advisors and the composition director ensures that students get consistent answers and advice, an important aspect of successful advising.

To encourage students to be assessed immediately and, if needed, to help them to accept their course placement, academic advisement is crucial. Advisors help students understand how their writing develops and how composition instruction can contribute to their academic success. Advisors who see these transfer students know the composition program and support its aims; several advisors, in fact, regularly teach

writing courses. These academic advisors also have easy access to students' records and writing assessment results through a computerized database, so they can more skillfully advise these students.

Experience in assessing and advising transfer students has identified two important components:

1. Of special interest to academic advisors is the length of time that students take to develop proficiency in writing. Because the intellectual competencies practiced in writing courses are complex, their development proceeds at widely varying rates in a diverse student population. In CUNY, an open admissions institution, (a) about 40% of transfers are proficient writers, (b) 50% need one or two semesters of college-level composition, and (c) some persisting students may take from three to five semesters of instruction to reach proficiency. Individualizing placement and advising helps to keep the program flexible.

2. To allow transfer students to progress without jeopardizing their academic standing, we have found that the senior college should establish a system of grading for these required skills courses that does not penalize students for their previous lack of preparation. For example, at Lehman students are assigned a No Credit grade for all required composition courses that they are unable to complete satisfactorily. This No Credit grade does not count against students' GPAs or their eligibility for financial aid.

Evaluation

When every effort has been made to assess transfer students' writing proficiency and place these students in appropriate courses when they enter, evaluations show that rates of academic success have been much higher. For example, when we first implemented the policy on writing proficiency, we had to write to 147 students who ignored their signed contracts; 49 of these students had to be stopped from enrolling the following semester. It is noteworthy that 20 of those 49 students (41%) were already in academic jeopardy after only one or two semesters at Lehman. Three years later, only 8 students had to be stopped, 4 of whom were below the required 2.0 GPA and were dropped for poor scholarship.

Boyd and the Counseling Center Retention Study Group (1989) at the University of Maryland-College Park found that when efforts to enforce students' making advisement appointments

ments were lax students tended to avoid the requirement and ran much higher risks of academic difficulty. We had a similar experience. Several semesters after that in which only 8 students were stopped, we were unable to send out the follow-up letters to unassessed students and relied only on the initial advisement contact and the signed contract. In this group a monitoring check revealed that 119 of 782 eligible transfers (15%) had not been assessed. Of these 119 students, 22% were already in academic jeopardy. Of those who had been assessed and needed further instruction, 30 had not registered for the course that they had been placed into; 40% of these students were in academic jeopardy. In other words, without follow-up letters and extended contact with advisors and the composition program, many students avoided assessment and registration in writing courses, running a greater risk of low GPAs and consequent probation.

We believe that our experience supports our premise that quickly getting students assessed and enrolled in appropriate composition courses contributes to more stable college careers. Although we have not made a systematic study of the records of graduating transfer students, we have continued the close monitoring of students' progress and the rather tedious follow-up procedures to enforce the policy on writing proficiency. We are convinced that the least these prevention techniques do is bring at-risk students into contact with supportive advisors who make the strong case that developing their intellectual competencies should be their highest academic priority.

Conclusion

Is it worth it?

Yes. Despite the significant effort such a complex system takes, academic advisors and program administrators directly involved think that the students' understanding of requirements and their academic success are definitely worth the time and effort.

First, because many of the seriously underprepared students take extra semesters to work their way to the writing proficiency required by the college, this system gets them started more quickly; we do not wait for their failure to identify at-risk students. The need for instruction is especially true for many nonnative, as well as nonstandard, English speakers. It is also true for many adult students. Whatever the cause for

their underpreparation, it is our experience at a senior college in an urban university that, of the 60% of transfer students who must take composition at Lehman, about 30% of transfer students currently take three or more semesters (after they have entered the composition sequence) to complete the composition requirement. When students transfer with as many as 68 credits, it is, therefore, imperative that they begin their composition instruction, if it is needed, immediately. Careful monitoring by the college is the only way to prevent "graduation disasters," those students who have completed all course work required for graduation except composition.

Second, students who, through their writing courses, become engaged in active critical reading, writing, and thinking are apparently, as the Lehman study cited earlier shows, more successful as students in their other college courses than other students. These students persist, and their GPAs are higher.

Third, the literature on standards and practices in advising emphasizes the importance of integrating academic advisement throughout the institution (Frank, 1988; Kramer, 1988). The cooperative efforts of the academic advisors and English composition program described here have led to other cooperative ventures between academic departments and student services. The English department, for example, now offers a special workshop for transfer students to help them prepare for the writing assessment, and the office of the Dean of Students offers a workshop on reducing test anxiety.

The Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Lehman, Ruth Milberg-Kaye, describes our efforts as preventive, rather than intrusive or interventionist, advisement. Underprepared students need to avoid academic difficulties to experience academic success, but many of them do not know how to go about achieving that success. When the various parts of the academic community work together cooperatively to assess and advise them, these students have dramatically increased chances of success.

References

- Abrams, H. G., & Jernigan, L. P. (1984). Academic support services and the success of high-risk college students. *American Educational Research*, 21(2), 261-274.
- Boyd, V., & Counseling Center Retention Study Group. (1987). *Diagnostic and prescriptive interviews*

- with transfer students in academic jeopardy (Research Report No. 16-87). College Park, MD: University of Maryland-College Park Counseling Center.
- Cellucci, P. M. C., & Price, T. P. (1986, April). *A map for success: A high-risk student retention plan*. Paper presented at the convention of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, Dallas, TX. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 278 440)
- Daly, J. (1985). Writing apprehension. In M. Rose (Ed.), *When a writer can't write* (pp. 43-82). New York: Guildford Press.
- Ford, J., & Ford, S. S. (1989). A caring attitude and academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 9(2), 43-48.
- Frank, C. P. (1988). The development of academic advising programs: Formulating a model. *NACADA Journal*, 8(1), 11-28.
- Gordon, R., Jr. (1987). *A retention and achievement program for non-traditional black students*. Chicago: Northeastern Illinois University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 289 409)
- Graham, S., & Dallam, J. (1986). Academic probation as a measure of performance: Contrasting transfer students to native students. *Community/Junior College Quarterly of Research and Practice*, 10(1), 75-84.
- Hall, B. A. (1990). Variables affecting the academic success of community college transfer students (Doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate School). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 321 796)
- Hamby, E. E. H. (1988). *The CUNY transfer express project: Report of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project*. Washington, DC: Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 306 901)
- Handel, S. J., & Muratore, J. C. (1988). A counseling service's review of a general education curriculum. *NACADA Journal*, 8(1), 63-71.
- Janasiewicz, B. A. (1987) Campus leaving behavior. *NACADA Journal*, 7(2), 23-30.
- Jenkins, J., Moore, E., & Cherry, A. (1981). *Promoting persistence through cognitive style analysis and self-management techniques*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University College of Education.
- Kramer, G. L. (1988). Enhancing the role of academic advising on the college campus. *NACADA Journal*, 8(1), 3-6.
- Krashen, S. (1978). *Writing: Research, theory, and applications*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Patrick, J., Furlow, J. W., & Donovan, S. (1988). Using a comprehensive academic intervention program in the retention of high-risk students. *NACADA Journal*, 8(1), 29-34.
- Sharkey, S. J., Bischoff, P. M., Echols, D., Morrison, C., Northman, E. A., Liebman, A., & Steele, B. (1987). Pioneer programs for retaining "at-risk" students. In M. Stodt (Ed.), *Increasing retention: Academic and student affairs administrators in partnership* (pp. 61-86) (New Directions in Higher Education No. 60). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, A. D. (1983). Stated reasons for withdrawal and degrees of satisfaction among student persisters and nonpersisters. *NACADA Journal*, 3(1), 73-84.
- Taylor, D. V. (1987). Academically deficient readmitted students: Are they really a high risk? *NACADA Journal*, 7(1), 41-47.
- Vaala, L. D. (1988). Satisfaction and success of university students in transfer programs (Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 308 915)
- Zimmerman, W. W. (1981). *A study of the academic success of students changing from a regional campus to the central campus of The Ohio State University* (Self-study Report No. 6). Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Institutional Research Series.
- Elizabeth J. Cooper is now Director of Composition and Rhetoric at Virginia Commonwealth University. Johannah S. Franke is an academic advisor in Lehman College's Office of Undergraduate Studies. Address correspondence concerning this article to Elizabeth J. Cooper, Department of English, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2005.*