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ABSTRACT

This article documents the conception and development of a tool for providing academic and counseling support to meet the needs of minority adult students in an urban community college environment. Specifically, the tool is a course having as its base the proper assessment of student needs and the revision of the syllabus to fit those needs. Aspects of course development, the objectives and methodology of the seminar aspect of the course, and the objectives and methodology of the study skills aspect of the course are addressed. They study skills aspect of the course is evaluated at the end of the term, with the seminar aspect being evaluated as early as the second session. The end of term evaluation is somewhat more formalized, with students responding in writing to a questionnaire. The significant aspect of this tool is considered to be that it was developed at the request of and with the critical evaluation of the student body. After two years, the course's effectiveness is said to be reflected in the positive feedback from students and faculty. The course has now become a part of the core of required courses for all freshmen. (Author/AM)

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Freshman Seminar at Malcolm-King:

Harlem College Extension: A Tool For

Providing Academic and

Emotional Support

November 1974

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is a college in Harlem that offers free college courses to hundreds of Black and Puerto Rican men and women. It began as a local community effort six years ago in East Harlem with a dedicated core of volunteers. Beginning by offering one course to a group of students in a local resident's living room, this college, Malcolm-King: Harlem College Extension, is now a community college offering associate degrees in business, early childhood education, elementary education and liberal arts. Since it is an extension of three colleges - Marymount Manhattan College, the College of Mount Saint Vincent and Fordham University - Malcolm-King is an accredited extension college. Many students have transferred credits from Malcolm-King to City University and other colleges with little difficulty.

Unlike most other private higher education institutions, Malcolm-King students do not pay tuition. With minimal funding from the public and private sector, Malcolm-King exists because it has a small, dedicated administrative staff under the leadership of Dr. Mattie Cook, a recognized educational leader, and a sincere volunteer faculty of 100. Malcolm-King's growth has been phenomenal; the student body has grown from 7 to over 800 adult students. Students enter Malcolm-King with a high school diploma or its equivalency. All courses are conducted in the evening at sites selected to suit the convenience of the student body: Intermediate School 201, and Resurrection School.

The students are predominantly Black and Puerto Rican adults who are much older than the average college population. Many of them would not have been admitted to college in New York City under the normal admissions policies; nor, could these students have paid the tuition. They would have been labeled "non-matriculating" students and paid high fees.

Malcolm-King students presented many challenges to those of us in higher education. Many had negative experiences with the established education system and were in effect, "turned off" to school and college. Yet, they recognized that job advancement and higher income would only come to them after they acquired more education. Most of our students have been deprived of the traditional college preparatory training and therefore lacked confidence in their ability to do college work. Others needed to learn basic college skills, such as proficiency in taking exams and writing term papers. We found that the majority of the students who had difficulty with basic college skills would not voluntarily use our study skills center or counseling services.

Yet, for many, Malcolm-King was the last chance. We had to do our best to offer Malcolm-King students every opportunity to succeed. Recognizing that traditional grading systems were too punitive, we started by changing the grading policy. The Malcolm-King Administration, in a departure from traditional student evaluation procedures, decided that failing grades would not be recorded on students' transcript.

While students could fail a course, they were granted the opportunity to repeat the course they failed without being penalized. Contrary to their past educational experience, students were not being penalized for trying to master the course content.

As the student population began to grow, our awareness of the kinds of academic difficulties they faced increased as well. Students in basic courses in the social sciences and the humanities complained about not being able to handle the requirements of their courses. The study skills center was founded in 1971 to provide tutoring for individuals and small groups on weekdays prior to classes and on Saturdays. The tutoring was provided to address the specific problems as expressed by the student. Students needed to improve their skills in reading college level textbook material, writing research papers, taking written examinations, using library resources, and other related tasks. Because a direct relationship exists between the level of a student's academic skills and his self-confidence, personal counseling was also needed by these students. Soon, the concerns of the individual in these small group sessions began progressively to echo throughout the growing student population. The need for a course that would respond to the varied academic and counseling needs of the students was clearly indicated.

II. THE BEGINNING

Traditionally, syllabus development has been a function unique to the administration and faculty of a college. An instructor or instructional department identifies the need for a course and then begins to create and develop a syllabus. And, since faculty jealously guard this prerogative, students are rarely, if ever, involved in this complex task. Malcolm-King's counseling department and the study skills center maintained that since the student is most affected by the curriculum, he should assume an active role in its development, particularly, in supportive courses. This is not to say, however, that the student should assume a major responsibility for course development.

The introductory course had its beginning in the constant requests of students who were receiving tutorial help in composition writing as well as other academic skills. This course was first introduced in the summer of 1972. The following semester, a series of twelve two-hour sessions were conducted under the title, Educational Development Seminar - Study Skills Program. The program was designed by the counselors and study skills instructors around the needs of Malcolm-King students as perceived by the students and faculty. Included in the program were preparation in basic listening skills, methods of note taking, library skills and term paper writing. The immediate implementation of this program was the result of the belief on the part of faculty and administration about institutional flexibility for the benefit of the students.

In the spring of 1973, after being made a credited requirement for incoming students, the course title was officially changed to Introduction to College Study and Research Skills.

III. COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Course objectives for any course should derive from considerations of student needs as well as helping the student to acquire a specific level of knowledgeability and/or proficiency in the given subject areas. The idea of student "needs" can be viewed from at least two perspectives: the student's and the instructor's. Each believes he knows what the student needs. Traditionally, however, the faculty of an educational institution has determined what a course will cover, often with little concern as to whether or not this course meets the academic needs of the student. To meet student needs, a course must be designed to begin where the students are. It must proceed at a humane pace - one that recognizes the strengths and limitations of the students.

To design the curriculum to meet the needs of our student body, we involved significant members of the college community in the planning and teaching of the seminar. A counselor, a faculty member and two students were members of the first planning and teaching team. We jointly developed the objectives for the course and planned the curriculum.

Introduction to College Study and Research Skills was first offered to a group of sophomore students. The class met each week in two(2) one-hour sessions. One session was devoted to learning academic skills and was conducted by the study skills center staff. The other session, known as the seminar, was conducted by the counselling department.

They found it to be extremely helpful and advised us to make the seminar a requirement for all incoming students. Since the Fall of 1972, the seminar section of the course has been periodically and substantially revised. We have retained the parts of the syllabus which have worked and deleted content which seemed irrelevant to the students' needs.



IV. OBJECTIVES OF SEMINAR ASPECT OF THE COURSE

We knew that Malcolm-King students had many questions and concerns about their college experiences. But, many of them were reluctant to approach the counselors with these concerns. We believed that since students were hesitant about approaching counselors, the course should be designed in such a way that the counseling needs of students could be addressed as an integral part of the course.

The overall objective of the seminar was to help students understand the relationship of their academic career and personal goals. Often, students would decide to enter a specific career without knowledge of the educational requirements of the field or without giving any consideration to the changes that would occur in their personal lives as a result of their decision. We sought to help students answer the question: "Where am I going?" By beginning to identify future goals, students were being encouraged to view their current educational experience at Malcolm-King more seriously.

As of the Spring of 1974, the seminar's syllabus included the following topic areas:

- A. Positive and Negative Attitudes in the Learning Process
- B. Personal Awareness
- C. Career Opportunities for the community college Graduate
- D. Additional topics to be added after student discussion.

Based upon our experience, we felt that these areas addressed the needs of our incoming students. We also provided for the inclusion of additional topics suggested by the students during the course of the seminar. In fact, we devoted the entire second session of the seminar to assessing the needs of the students and developing additional content areas.

V. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY SKILLS ASPECT OF THE COURSE

An adult returning to or beginning higher education needs the assurance that he is able to be successful. He needs to feel that he possesses the skills that are necessary to be successful. The objectives of the study skills aspect of the course are designed to equip the students with the basic academic skills.

While Malcolm-King students are, as a group, highly motivated, this is not sufficient to insure satisfactory academic performance and to prevent student attrition. However, a direct relationship between the level of academic skill and the extent of self-confidence has been noted among Malcolm-King students. The objective of the study skills aspect of the course is to capitalize on the existence of this factor and, thereby, improve the quality of the students academic performance.

A student completing the study skills aspect of the course should have developed his academic skills enough to create a sense of confidence in his ability to continue, on his own, to further develop those skills in preparation for more difficult academic challenges ahead of him.

VI. METHODOLOGY OF SEMINAR ASPECT OF THE COURSE

When we agreed upon our objectives, we were faced with devising a method of accomplishing these objectives. The laboratory approach to learning, rather than the traditional lecture approach, was to become our model. Fundamental to the laboratory method is the belief that people learn by doing. If a person has an experience and can derive learning from his experience, this learning will be of greater significance to the person than if the learning had been derived primarily from an intellectual process.

Laboratory training is based on the following simple proposition concerning learning about "self-in-relation to others":

1. The best medium for such learning is one's own experience.
2. The optimum training methods for such learning are those which help the participant observe, understand and generalize from his own experience.¹

Incorporating the laboratory approach to learning in the seminar involved the following process:

- a. deciding upon the content areas that we wanted the students to learn (as noted before, students were involved in this process);
- b. providing situations for students in which they experience these content areas;
- c. identifying significant aspects of the experience with students;
- d. analyzing the experiences with students;
- e. generalizing about the learning derived from the experience.

¹ Barry Oshry, "The Participant - Observer Designs", Selections From Human Relations Training News

By simulating experiences in the seminar, we help each student to participate in his own learning experience and to share in the learning experiences of others in the group. The counselor acts as the facilitator, not the instructor, of the group. The counselor encourages the students to share their experiences with the group and thereby enrich the learning of everyone, including the counselor.

We used the laboratory approach to introduce a problem solving method. Many students were facing difficulties in completing an assigned term paper-project. Through this problem solving method, they were helped to identify these difficulties and to apply the problem solving method in order to find a solution. The procedure involved in this method is as follows:

- I. State Objective
- II. State Problem and Identify Sub-Problem
- III. Collect Data
- IV. Identify Alternatives
- V. Select Alternatives
- VI. Follow-up Action

By using this approach, the students were able to resolve most of the problems they experienced in attempting to construct a term paper.

The laboratory approach also enabled us to speak with students about difficult subjects. One semester we found

that our students had difficulty responding to an exercise which asked them to list their accomplishments. However, when we asked the students to recreate their life experiences (accomplishments, etc.) pictorially by assembling a collage, the students found it easier, as well as enjoyable to complete this task. Through the medium of the collage, the students were able to recapture many past experiences and project into the future.

The emphasis upon a free flow of ideas among students in the seminar enhances their level of learning. Many Malcolm-King students have had valuable life experiences, and much can be learned by sharing them with one another. This process also contributed to the development of peer support groups. For evening students, the seminar was very important since many students did not have family or friends who had or were currently attending college. Their fellow students could more readily empathize with the problems of a person holding a full-time position and attending college in the evening. Students were also encouraged to give each other feedback. One evening, a group of students was discussing some of the problems that resulted from college attendance. When a student complained of not having enough time to do her homework, a fellow student told her that she did not have a serious enough attitude toward her school work, and that this was the real reason why she could not complete her assignments. Through their discussion

with fellow students, all the students realized that they would have to make many sacrifices in order to earn their degree. Talking to a mother who had to leave her children with a babysitter in order to attend classes or a student who decided to attend the library on weekends instead of "hanging out", helped other students to adjust their lives to the demands that attending college was making.

The seminar's success is due largely to two factors:

1. the involvement of students in the planning and teaching of the course
2. the counselor's role in the planning and teaching of the course.

Students have always been involved in the planning and teaching of the seminar. The first seminar was co-lead by a counselor-student team. Although the seminar is now led by a counselor, students often team teach with a counselor. One summer, Malcolm King offered the introduction course to a group of male students who had been former drug addicts. The only counselor available to lead the seminar was female, and it was felt that these students needed a strong male role model. A mature male Malcolm King student, who was working as a drug rehabilitation counselor, was asked to co-lead the seminar with the female Malcolm King counselor. The co-leadership of the seminar greatly enriched the quality of instruction and provided a male role model for the students in the class. On another occasion, a

male counselor in his mid-twenties team taught with a female student in her mid-forties; this team could relate to both the younger and more mature students in the seminar.

As mentioned in the section on course implementation, Malcolm-King's counseling department met regularly to plan and revise the seminar's syllabus. Working as a team, the counseling department wrote, role played, and criticized seminar exercises. We were constantly working toward designing a syllabus that would effectively meet student needs.

The counselor's role in the seminar was defined as being a facilitator. As a facilitator, the counselor used him/herself to encourage students to share their experiences and knowledge with their fellow students. Since the counselor could not have all of the answers to student concerns, students were encouraged to work out answers for themselves. The pattern of communication during the seminar session could be characterized as cross dialogue among the students. Discussions were not dominated by the facilitator.

The creation of a climate of emotional support for incoming Malcolm-King students was a very important objective in the development of the seminar. For many students, the seminar group functioned as a support group. In the seminar, they could talk about their problems, feelings, hopes and fears engendered by their new college experience. Students gained an appreciation for expressing their feelings and talking about their con-

cerns. The seminar brought the services of the counseling department closer to Malcolm-King students. Wherever possible, the student was assigned to the seminar led by his assigned counselor. Incoming students met their counselor weekly in the seminar. Gradually, a relationship with the counselor was developed. Students overcame their initial fears about the counseling process and began to initiate individual meetings with their counselor.

VII. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY SKILLS ASPECT OF COURSE

This aspect of the course is designed to equip incoming students with the skills necessary to function effectively in the educational community. The topics covered are varied and include the following:

- Listening and note-taking skills

- Studying textbooks

 - underlining textbooks for effective study and review

 - "Surveying" a book and a chapter.

- Preparing for and Taking Examinations

- Using the library

- Writing the research paper

 - topic selection

 - researching topic

 - constructing research paper outline

 - beginning the first draft

While the above subject areas do not comprise all that a student has to know to function at his best, they do represent critical areas of competency that determine how well a student performs. The purpose of this aspect of the course is to provide the knowledge and skills in these critical academic areas.

To do this, the instructor functions in at least three(3) different capacities:

- he teaches the student the technical knowledge needed to develop academic skills..

- he provides materials and classroom opportunity for transfer of this knowledge.

-he constantly, as a matter of methodology, encourages the student to utilize the knowledge he gained before attending Malcolm-King.

The instructor recognizes that there are techniques of performing academic tasks that are effective for most students because they derive from some principles of human psychology and common sense. The instructor presents these techniques in a class lecture. The students discuss the pros and cons of the technique. Many times during this discussion, students describe alternative methods that have worked effectively in their own experience. In a class discussion of note-taking skills, the instructor presents three(3) note taking formats and a five-step study process that makes the best use of the notes. However, students are encouraged to analyze the instructor's presentation and synthesize other methods if they find it more beneficial.

Most students come to Malcolm-King with a wealth of experience derived from their various jobs and from life in general. The average age of the Malcolm-King student population is approximately 32 years. The instructor's aim is to encourage students to criticize and analyze whatever study methods are presented to them against their own background and experience. Study methods are not inflexible; they are easily adaptable to the needs and, indeed, the preference of the individual students. Each study technique is presented as a method that is reliable

and that has been found effective in the past for a significant number of college students.

The instructor then provides materials supplementary to the textbook for classroom and homework practice. Opportunities for classroom practice are considered extremely important because they provide immediate reinforcement of newly acquired skills. During class discussions of the library resources and classification systems, students have had the opportunity to visit the now defunct Urban Center Library of Columbia University. There they were permitted to examine important primary research volumes and hear a lecture delivered by the librarian, who used an overhead projector as her principal teaching aid. The students were also given assignments by the librarian that were designed to transfer and reinforce their learning. These assignments were presented to the instructor for his comments and corrections.

Lessons on writing the research paper extended throughout five(5) out of fifteen(15) class sessions. During these sessions students are taught how to set up a bibliography and footnotes, how to select and research a proposed topic and how to begin the first draft of their papers. The student is required, as a result of this learning to write a short paper concerning his career choice. This paper is graded by the skills instructor for style and format and by the counselor-instructor for content. The paper is returned to the student with appropriate comments from both instructors.

VIII. EVALUATION

Evaluation of Introduction to College Study and Research Skills is and must be an empirical process. Adequate evaluation of a preparatory course presumes clear definition of the needs of the student in each of the areas addressed by the course. After this is done, the students and faculty are aware of the students needs and where his efforts must be directed. Then evaluation becomes an on-going process and functions as an aid to the students. His work is being constantly evaluated for accuracy, adequacy and quality. Wherever he is lacking in one or more of these areas, he is provided intensive aid by tutors in the study skills center while he continues the course.

Students evaluate the study skills aspect of the course at the end of the term. They respond to a questionnaire which deals with the student's perceptions concerning course objectives and instructor performance. The students' responses are tallied and are presented to the instructor and his supervisor for their evaluation.

Evaluation of this sort is, itself, a teaching tool. When a student presents his work, his errors are corrected as quickly as possible and returned to him with comments for improvement. He is constantly urged to recognize and incorporate as much as possible the skills he has developed over the semester.

In the seminar aspect of the course, evaluation is begun as early as the second session. In that session, we try to

determine whether the needs of Malcolm-King students correspond to the topic areas of the course. If we feel that the course content does not meet the needs of the students, we begin to revise our course syllabus. At mid-semester, one session is devoted to evaluation. In addition to evaluating the course, students are asked to evaluate their progress in the seminar and their other classes at Malcolm-King. Students are asked to respond to these questions in small groups of 3 after which they return to the total group to complete their discussion. The following questions are included as part of the mid-term evaluation:

- as a student, how would I evaluate myself in terms of:
- grades
- class participation
- relating to other students
- relating to family
- What could you (the student) do to get more out of this class?
- What could the counselor do to get more out of this class?

The end of term evaluation is somewhat more formalized. Students are asked to respond in writing to a questionnaire. The responses to the questionnaire are discussed in the total group.

Although the seminar evaluation is lengthy, it is considered to be very important. Initially, students have a lot of questions about the non-traditional approach of the course.

to focus on... at the end of the
...
They are anxious to plow right into a heavy academic program.
But by mid-semester when the reading assignments begin to
mount and term papers are due, the students begin to see the
importance of this course.

IX. CONCLUSION

Freshmen students at Malcolm-King reflect a wide range of academic skills. Some require just a review of basic academic skills for college study -- the course met this need adequately. For others, who needed more intensive instruction, the course promoted a greater sense of awareness of their academic deficiencies, provided them with basic academic skills instruction, and informed them of other resources at Malcolm-King to meet their needs. Also, there were students who were academically proficient, but who needed the emotional support provided by the seminar.

Introduction to College Study and Research Skills, from its beginning, was based on properly assessing student needs and revising the syllabus to fit those needs. After two years of being offered to Malcolm-King freshman, its effectiveness is reflected in the positive feedback from students and faculty. Malcolm-King students now make significantly greater use of counselling and study skills center services as a result of this course. Also, the course has become a part of the core of required courses for all freshmen at Malcolm-King.

Malcolm-King responded to the needs of the student body by developing the introduction to college study and research skills course. The relevancy of higher education in the future will depend upon the extent of institutional responsiveness to the needs of students -- especially in view of the academic level of most students entering college who have not had

the benefit of an adequate academic background. Many white college faculties and administrations are still debating whether or not it is their responsibility to develop the basic academic skills of freshman students. The black college was faced with this challenge years ago and is continuing to meet it. Malcolm-King was faced with this challenge upon opening its doors to the Harlem community. Indeed, Malcolm-King emerged as a direct response to a group of individuals who needed to improve their basic language arts skills in order to advance on their job. Malcolm-King has been responding to the student's needs and providing supportive services and higher education ever since.