



[../index.html](#)

▲ [Home](#)

[../index.html](#) ◀

[Contents](#)

[\(index.html\)](#)

Exploring Faculty Perceptions Toward Working with Academically Vulnerable College Students

By Robin L. Quick

Abstract

This study is an exploratory study of faculty members' knowledge and perceptions toward of with academically vulnerable college students who are specifically experiencing reading and writing difficulties. Data were gathered from 174 college faculty at six higher education institutions throughout northwestern Pennsylvania via an online electronic survey. The results suggest gaps exist between faculty perceptions of their role in working with academically vulnerable students and the implementation of assistance needed by this population. This study determined that more research is needed to determine the professional development requirements for faculty, particularly on instructional techniques to effectively work with this student population.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to begin to examine faculty knowledge and perceptions toward working with at-risk (academically vulnerable) college students who struggle in the areas of reading and writing; this has been recognized as an under-researched area within education and pedagogical scholarship. These students struggle due to a lack of skills needed for college-level reading and writing (Kleinert, 2012; Sherwin, 2011). Higher education faculty often rely on a traditionally reading-heavy curriculum, thus students who struggle in reading are at a distinct disadvantage (Conley, 2007; Tucker, 2007). College faculty need to critically examine beliefs concerning their responsibility for ensuring that all students, not just high achievers, can reach their potential. Considering the paucity of research in the area of faculty perceptions of pedagogy within this student cohort, this exploratory study has implications that may inform colleges and universities about the professional development needs of their faculty.

Background

Theoretical Framework

This research was influenced by Lee Shulman's theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge which discussed the need for those who teach to go beyond the knowledge of content to embrace the pedagogy required to effectively share that content with all students. Often having worked for years in their field, college faculty are well-versed in the content within the discipline they teach, and many are considered experts in that particular area. However, that does not automatically make them good teachers, and moreover, it does not mean that they automatically know what good

teaching is. They may lack the understanding of teaching pedagogy needed to work with diverse learners (Burgstahler & Doe, 2006; McShannon & Hynes, 2005; Scott & Gregg, 2000) especially those who are at-risk.

Review of Literature

In today's environment of open enrollment, it is not uncommon for at-risk students to pursue a four-year degree alongside their more traditionally prepared counterparts (Kleinert, 2012; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). In fact, there are more at-risk students enrolling in colleges and universities than ever before (Foushee & Sleigh, n.d.). Research indicates that the increase in academically at-risk students who are enrolling in higher education has grown beyond the scope of the on-campus tutoring centers (Huse, Wright, Clark & Hacker, 2005; Donnelly, 2000) designed to work with them. Although a large majority of these students enroll in community colleges, it is estimated that a quarter of all students attending four-year postsecondary institutions will have a "challenge significant enough to impair their success if not compensated for or corrected" (Spann, 2000, p. 2). In order to increase the achievement of at-risk students, collegiate faculty need to be able to recognize the characteristics of a struggling student and have the pedagogical knowledge on how to assist them to ensure they are successful (Johnson, 2006; Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education, 2005). Thus, it is now necessary for faculty to address the needs of students enrolled in their classrooms (Kleinert, 2012; Perin, 2006; Foushee & Sleigh, n.d.). The responsibility to provide effective professional development programs for faculty falls on higher education institutions.

Of course, it is not sensible to divorce the pedagogy of higher education from the educational experience that vulnerable students have in high school or other forms of education because it represents an educational lineage where each stage impacts upon the next. However, that is a little beyond the scope of this research, which focuses on the ability of faculty members to recognize and respond to these teaching needs.

For the purpose of this study, respondents were given instruction that the under-prepared, at-risk student population discussed would be referred to as *academically vulnerable*. This removes those students considered at-risk due to social or financial issues and centers on academic concerns, specifically students who struggle with reading and writing at a traditional college level. These students have normal intelligence and can succeed, but are susceptible to failing without support.

Methodology

Design

As this was an explanatory study, this research was aimed at picking up signposts to further research trajectories, rather than attempting to be too diagnostic in its own right. Thus, the research design first attempted to pinpoint areas where faculty feel they need further instruction, and second, where there is a mismatch between actual needs and faculty beliefs.

Therefore the research instrument used was intended to be broad enough to cover such a large subject, while accepting that it will limit the detail and explanatory power.

The study utilized an electronic 30-item survey encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data. The survey included nine demographic variables (gender, title/rank, institution type, tenure status, years in higher education, discipline, professional development resources, access to a Center for Teaching and Learning, and level of training), 16 Likert-scale response statements, and five open-ended questions to gauge faculty perception concerning their role in educating academically vulnerable students. The first 25 items in this survey were adapted from the Assessment of Faculty Attitudes and Beliefs toward Accommodations for Students with Disabilities by (Bourque, 2004). Four of the five open-ended questions were adapted from a study in a white paper which was prepared and posted on the Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia website (Joyce, 1999).

In order to ensure the survey instrument was reliable, and the bias and positionality of the researcher was minimized, the researcher had the survey reviewed and evaluated by faculty of the developmental department of a local community college and the director of the Program for Students with Learning Disabilities at a local private college. The reviewers were asked to evaluate the survey for effectiveness of design and accuracy of terminology. The survey was refined and a cohort of doctoral students in the Curriculum and Instruction doctoral degree program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania were asked to review and evaluate the survey for readability and design effectiveness. The survey was redesigned based on the feedback. The survey instrument was then piloted with faculty members at Gannon University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. These faculty members were asked to evaluate the survey for readability and design effectiveness. Feedback from both sets of reviewers and the pilot group resulted in the final version. The sum total of this design was a well refined and defensible survey instrument.

The electronic survey was distributed via email during the months of April 2008 and May 2008 to full-time instructional faculty through the use of StudentVoice®.com, a web-based survey company. The sample was approximately 1200 faculty from all departments and specialties within the college or university.

Participants

Northwest Pennsylvania was chosen because it is the home state of the researcher and thus affords a greater sense of familiarity with the demographics of the faculty and student populations. The target institutions were narrowed down to twelve northwestern Pennsylvania colleges and universities, based on their geographical location, and contacted to participate in the survey. Six institutions agreed to participate. The survey response rate was 182 participants from three public institutions ($n=109$), two state-related institutions ($n=52$), and one private college ($n=21$), with

174 of those respondents completing at least 80 percent of the survey. Forty-two percent ($n=73$) of respondents were male and 58 percent ($n=101$) were female. Faculty members were well-balanced across years of experience (Table 1), and rank (Table 2). A cross-section of disciplines was represented including Arts & Humanities, Business, Education, Engineering & Applied Science, Health & Medical Science, Natural & Physical Science, and Social Science.

Table 1.

Faculty Years of Experience

| Years | N | Percentage |
|--------------|----------|-------------------|
| 0-9 | 51 | 29% |
| 10-19 | 59 | 34% |
| 20-29 | 44 | 25% |
| 30-50 | 19 | 11% |

Note. 1 respondent chose not to answer this question

Table 2.

Faculty by Rank

| Rank | N | Percentage |
|----------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Instructors | 23 | 13% |
| Assistant Professors | 55 | 32% |
| Associate Professors | 44 | 25% |
| Full Professors | 51 | 29% |

Note. 1 respondent chose not to answer this question

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study asked: Are college faculty adequately prepared to offer assistance to academically vulnerable students who experience reading and writing difficulties? Survey responses were further evaluated against four sub-questions which focused on the following: 1) how faculty perceived their responsibility in assisting academically vulnerable students; 2) how well prepared faculty felt they were in offering assistance; 3) how well faculty could identify academically vulnerable students; and 4) whether gender, discipline, or years of experience impacted faculty perception. The following discussion summarizes the findings in this study as defined by the four sub-questions and includes a brief summary of the open-ended qualitative data.

Findings

Summary of Quantitative Survey Data

Research Question 1: To what extent do college faculty believe they are responsible for assisting vulnerable students who experience reading and writing difficulties?

Research Question 1 looked at faculty's overall perception of responsibility in offering assistance to academically vulnerable students. Eighty percent ($n=139$) said faculty play a vital role in meeting the educational needs of academically vulnerable students and 78 percent ($n=136$) said providing assistance was consistent with good pedagogy. Yet, 82 percent ($n=142$) felt the responsibility of assisting academically vulnerable students should fall to the on-campus student learning centers. Only 42 percent ($n=73$) felt the responsibility fell on faculty. Fifty-eight percent ($n=101$) said students who struggle with reading and writing should attend a community college.

Research Question 2: To what extent do college faculty feel they are prepared to offer assistance to academically vulnerable students who experience reading and writing difficulties?

Responses were split over whether faculty felt prepared to assist academically vulnerable students. More than half, 59 percent ($n=103$), felt they had sufficient background in educational methodology. Forty-nine percent ($n=85$) thought their institution provided them with adequate training. This suggests half of the respondents felt they could benefit from further professional development training in instructional strategies; and thus this suggests that the other half were of the opposite opinion.

Research Question 3: To what extent are college faculty adequately prepared to identify the characteristics of an academically vulnerable student who experiences reading and writing difficulties?

Two questions focused on the extent to which faculty felt prepared to identify the characteristics of academically vulnerable students.

Seventy-nine percent ($n=137$) recognized that academically vulnerable students were not struggling due to a low IQ. When asked about their preparedness to identify students with reading and writing difficulties, 55 percent ($n=95$) said they were adequately prepared, while 44 percent ($n=76$) said they were not.

Respondents recognized that reading and writing difficulties are not initially visible. Thus, faculty may not realize a student is at a deficit until the student fails an exam or project. These students often go unnoticed until they withdraw from college because faculty failed to recognize the students' learning needs or detect a problem (Beck & Davidson, 2001).

Research Question 4: To what extent do differences in gender, discipline, or years of experience in higher education impact attitude or willingness to offer assistance to students with reading and writing difficulties?

Prior research indicated gender, age, teaching experience, faculty status, and academic rank may play a role in the attitudes of faculty toward working with underprepared students (Johnson, 2006; Vogel, Burgstahler, Sligar, & Zecker, 2006). A correlation of demographic responses and survey results was conducted to gauge if these factors would impact this study. A review of findings revealed that gender and age had a limited impact, while discipline and years of experience offered at least one correlation of note, particularly between years of teaching experience and responses to providing out-of-class assistance. Seventy-four percent ($n=14$) of faculty who had taught 30-50 years stated they would provide out-of-class assistance. Only 29 percent ($n=17$) of faculty in the 10-19 year range stated they were willing to do so.

To ascertain the impact discipline had on faculty responses, data was coded into two groups: Teacher Education faculty ($n=21$) and Other Discipline faculty ($n=148$). Eighty-one percent ($n=17$) of Teacher Education faculty felt they had sufficient background in educational methods needed for working with academically vulnerable students. In contrast, only 59 percent ($n=87$) of Other Discipline faculty felt that they had sufficient background.

This was couched by further data findings around educational methods. Thirty-eight percent of faculty respondents ($n=4$ Teacher Education and $n=59$ Other) felt they did not have sufficient training to teach struggling students. Twenty-seven percent ($n=39$) stated they had no formal training in dealing with academically vulnerable students.

Faculty were asked if making accommodations for academically vulnerable students decreased their teaching effectiveness. Eighty-one percent ($n=17$) of Teacher Education faculty disagreed. However, 48 percent of Other Discipline faculty ($n=71$) said making accommodations did decrease their effectiveness. This may come from the misunderstanding that making accommodations for learning needs is equal to “dumbing down” the curriculum. This analysis is supported in the following faculty responses in the open-ended section:

- *When information has to be diluted (dumbed down) to accommodate the slowest learners, the typical students in the class are not challenged enough.*
- *Dealing with these problems means that I am unable to teach the course material at a level and to a depth that is appropriate for college level knowledge... Throughout my 32 years of teaching, I have constantly been forced to water down my courses as the learning ability of the students has decreased.*

Summary of Qualitative Data

Five open-ended questions offered faculty the opportunity to express opinions on barriers, frustrations, preparedness, instructional needs, and knowledge of working with academically vulnerable students. Time was the most common response to the questions concerning barriers and frustrations (Table 3).

Table 3.

Question 27 - What are your frustrations in teaching students with reading and writing difficulties? (146 respondents)

| Response | # | % |
|---|----------|----------|
| Time | 17 | 12% |
| Lack of student effort/initiative | 11 | 8% |
| Poor early learning experience | 11 | 8% |
| "Dumbing down" content or instruction | 6 | 4% |
| Not qualified to teach vulnerable students | 5 | 3% |
| Lack of faculty training/knowledge concerning vulnerable students | 4 | 3% |
| Lack of consistency in standards between faculty/departments | 4 | 3% |
| Students manipulating the system | 3 | 2% |
| Institutional reluctance/support | 3 | 2% |
| Absenteeism | 3 | 2% |
| Poor writing skills | 2 | 1% |
| Poor student attitude | 2 | 1% |

Note. Not all respondents chose to answer this question

Time issues were also considered an instructional need. The demands for faculty to publish research may leave little time for professional development (Erklenz-Watts, Westbay & Lynd-Balta, 2006). Faculty expressed concerns that institutional requirements, specifically advising and tenure obligations, made it difficult to find time to tutor students. Comments similar to the following were recurrent:

- *Trying to balance all my responsibilities of classroom instruction, preparation, advisement, and university committee work.*

In addition to the 27 percent ($n=39$) of faculty who reported they had no formal training in working with academically vulnerable students, another seven percent ($n=10$) indicated only fair to minimal training (Table 4).

Table 4.

Question 28 - To what extent have you been prepared to serve the students you teach who are experiencing reading and writing difficulties? Please explain your answer. (147 respondents)

| Response | # | % |
|--|----|-----|
| No formal training | 39 | 27% |
| On-the-job experience | 25 | 17% |
| Background in education/public school experience | 25 | 17% |
| Workshop/professional development opportunities | 21 | 14% |
| Degree/education | 13 | 9% |
| Faculty intrinsic motivation/professional responsibility | 9 | 6% |
| Personal experience (family or self) | 8 | 5% |
| Disability Office training | 8 | 5% |
| Minimal training | 8 | 5% |
| Prior tutoring experience | 6 | 4% |
| Not prepared to deal with these students (refer to support centers) | 5 | 3% |
| Should not need to be prepared (students do not belong in higher ed) | 4 | 3% |
| Colleagues | 4 | 3% |
| Fair | 2 | 1% |
| Need more information on how to help | 2 | 1% |

Note. Not all respondents chose to answer this question

Scholarly Significance

Ultimately, this study found gaps between faculty perceptions of their role in working with academically vulnerable students and the implementation of assistance needed by this student population. In order to meet the needs of academically vulnerable students, it is imperative to understand which instructional strategies can assist students whose learning falls outside the norm. There are many strategies that faculty can implement immediately when working with academically vulnerable students such as creating an environment that encourages students to speak up when they do not understand, consider students' background when choosing readings and activities, use collaborative teaching and learning techniques, and pair struggling students with higher achieving students in small group activities (Codde, 2006).

Many faculty who participated in this study expressed the desire to learn additional strategies and techniques that would be effective with this student population. A prior research study, which looked at faculty perceptions toward faculty development, found that faculty participated when they felt the topics were relevant to their teaching and allowed for personal and professional growth (Steinert, et.al., 2010).

Discussion

With an increasingly diverse and larger at-risk population of students in higher education comes the obligation to evaluate the professional development of the faculty in whose classrooms these students will be educated. Of particular importance is whether faculty are being offered, and are taking advantage of, opportunities to learn about the characteristics and specific needs of academically vulnerable students who struggle with reading and writing. Are institutions offering professional development for faculty that relate to the most appropriate instructional strategies used to promote success? This issue must be brought to the forefront in order to deal with the larger concern of achievement and retention rates of vulnerable college students.

This research was undertaken to provide a starting point for a wider research trajectory that examines faculty knowledge and perceptions toward working with academically vulnerable college students and adds to the current body of knowledge concerning the professional development needs of postsecondary educators. Therefore, the results discussed below are taken as indicative, and suggest propositions that need to be excavated in much larger research projects.

This research found that only 57 percent ($n=85$) of faculty outside of the Teacher Education field felt that they had sufficient background to work with academically vulnerable students. This is compared to 81 percent ($n=17$) of Teacher Education faculty. Presumably, this is because Teacher Education faculty have training in pedagogy, student learning theory, methodology, instructional strategies, and effective teaching techniques.

Other research indicated that although many college faculty have not had the professional development training required to work with academically vulnerable students, most are “generally willing to provide accommodations” once they are aware of what strategies are appropriate (Burgstahler & Doe, 2006, p. 136). Faculty in this study reported using colleagues and mentors to increase their knowledge about academically vulnerable students.

Higher education institutions need to offer professional development that is explicit and strategic if faculty are to be successful in working with academically vulnerable college students. This data supports the need for institutions to make quality professional development a high priority.

Recommendations

In making recommendations, this paper is deliberately cautious. The author is cognizant that the data from this project is limited, and therefore so is the explanatory power that can be accorded to it. The core purpose of the research was to signal where a wider research agenda might profitably go in order to better understand how faculty can work with academically vulnerable students; nonetheless, it would be remiss not to postulate some recommendations, broad as they may be, from the data that has been presented within this paper.

This study indicated that relying on colleagues and mentors was the second most common method chosen by faculty for increasing knowledge about academically vulnerable students. In-service training, such as professional development workshops, had a direct, positive impact on faculty knowledge and attitude (Scott & Gregg, 2000). Blanton & Stylianou (2009) stated the importance of high quality professional development was "...to appreciate the fact that we are asking scholars with existing professional identities in a discipline to expand those identities to include expertise in teaching" (p. 91). Therefore, it would seem logical to recommend a directed training profile for all faculty members, rather than leaving them to take advantage of such opportunities by their own initiative.

On-campus professional development centers can offer faculty one-on-one consultation, peer observations, campus-wide training, and assistance with classroom instruction. Thus, this researcher makes the following recommendations:

- Implementation of Professional Learning Communities (Hord, 1997) as a component of professional development in higher education specifically focused on the issue of academically vulnerable students. In the case of academically vulnerable students, these learning communities could focus on identifying characteristics, researching instructional techniques, designing curriculum, and enhancing student learning. Learning communities are used as a form of new faculty orientations to introduce new faculty to the practices and culture of the institution (Cariaga-Lo, Worthy Dawkins, Enger, Schotter, & Spence, 2010). Learning communities offer faculty the opportunity to work together in cross-curricular groups (Mangan, 2011).
- Develop a strong communication system between faculty and the advising department and on-campus tutoring centers. Faculty may work closely with these departments to develop a needs assessment to identify topics appropriate for professional development workshops (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). In addition, the staff from these departments could help faculty develop comprehensive learning plans for struggling students.
- Include training on instructional practices in new hire workshops and orientations as well as provide continued support during the first year of employment.
- Professional development workshops that focus on strategies known to be successful with adult readers:

explicit or direct instruction, strategy instruction, scaffolding, active engagement, and structured instruction (McShane, 2005) could be implemented.

Concluding Remarks

This research was designed to gauge faculty perceptions concerning their work with academically vulnerable students. The findings provide the initial proposition that faculty feel they are in need of professional development in this area. However, further study is needed to determine the exact focus of the professional development needed in order to meet the needs of academically vulnerable students. Therefore, the recommendations made in the paragraph above are not idle; they are intended to form the basis of research questions for a larger project and highlight the message that future research is desperately required, as levels of scholarship and understanding of these issues are sorely lacking. In recommending them as a strategy based on the data presented in this paper, the intention is that these recommendations could be implemented and tested as part of a research agenda.

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◀ **Contents** (index.html)

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