SOARing to New Heights with Underprepared Students

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In 2007, the president of Shelton State Community College in Alabama announced that with more than 60% of incoming freshmen placing into developmental courses, the college had a moral and ethical obligation to provide top-quality opportunities for underprepared students. He appointed a team to investigate options for improving services and coursework for incoming underprepared students and committed to providing the funding (without reliance on grants) that would be necessary. The result was the creation of the Student Opportunities for Achievement and Resources (SOAR) Institute, a comprehensive program that includes intensive mandatory advising, comprehensive tutoring services, and changes in developmental curricula and course offerings. SOAR has resulted in higher persistence rates and higher pass rates in both developmental courses and subsequent college-level coursework, expanded tutoring, and intensive individual advising/mentoring services for developmental students.

Between 2007 and 2011, an average of 1,300 new students enroll each fall at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Approximately 60% of first-time freshmen placed into at least one developmental writing, reading, or mathematics course. Once enrolled, students passed developmental courses at an average rate of 49% in English, 39% in reading, and 32% in mathematics from 2007-2011. Developmental courses were part of their respective academic divisions, and no comprehensive services were provided for students in developmental courses. Term-to-term persistence and overall retention were not tracked specifically for students in developmental courses. No students at the college were assigned to advisors. Little tutoring was available, tutors were not trained, and students who attended tutoring were not tracked. Collaboration between instruction and student services did not exist, and data for students in developmental courses was not monitored.

In 2011, the SOAR Institute was created. With SOAR, Student Opportunities for Achievement and Resources, the following changes have been realized through spring 2016. Intrusive advising with "navigators" for students in developmental courses has been instigated. Three thousand, nine hundred forty-four students have met with navigators for a total 14,966 one-on-one advising meetings.

- Of students who meet with a navigator, 87% enroll in classes. The national average of students placing into developmental classes who enroll is 67% (O'Banion, 2013).
- The semester-to-semester persistence rate for freshmen students working with a navigator is 72%.
- The average, fall-to-fall retention rate for students working with a navigator is 53%.
- The number of tutor sessions from fall 2011 through spring 2016 is 29,303.
- The redesign of developmental math courses in fall 2014 and creation of a math lab has resulted in 6,064 visits from students for over 3,326 hours of assistance.
- Collaboration between faculty and student support services has greatly increased. Evidence of this includes instructors communicating with navigators regarding student progress and attendance, and instructors spending time weekly in the developmental math lab to assist students.
- In spring 2016, two areas demonstrated that students in developmental courses are achieving success: 38% of graduates had taken developmental courses. The national average is 28% (Attewell, 2006). Of new Phi Theta Kappa inductees, 21% had taken developmental courses.
- Since its inception, over 92,600 student visits have been made to SOAR for assistance other than tutoring or advising, e.g., guidance in using the college's learning management system or help with technology, especially by non-traditional students. The number of visits for various services indicates that a welcoming, non-stigmatizing environment has been established.

The History of the SOAR Institute

In 2009, the president of Shelton State, a commuter college, formed a team to study successful developmental programs and to propose a plan for the college. The team was comprised of the director of special projects, an English instructor, a mathematics instructor, a reading instructor, an advisor, a retention specialist, and the director of adult education. First, the group read *What Works: Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education* (Boylan, 2002). This was followed by visits to model developmental programs in the southeast and much research. The research helped the team realize that the college needed to coordinate support services for students, re-envision advising practices, and possibly redesign the instructional practices for developmental courses. Brainstorming sessions were also held to gather input from stakeholders at the college. In addition, team members attended NADE and CRLA conferences, and consulted with Dr. Hunter R. Boylan and Dr. Edward A. Morante, bringing both to campus to meet with faculty and staff to help determine needs.

In 2010, a proposal for a developmental program was approved. The plan, a hybrid of centralized and decentralized components, incorporated tutoring services for all students, intrusive advising for students in developmental classes, and instructional support for instructors of developmental courses. The plan dictated that advising and tutoring services be housed in a centralized location. Instruction of developmental courses would stay with respective academic departments. Suggestions for the name of the program were accepted from a broad range of college personnel, and Student Opportunities for Achievement and Resources (SOAR) was selected. In January of 2011, a SOAR director was named, and implementation of the plan began. The Director attended the Kellogg Institute that summer. By the fall term, the SOAR Institute was established and located at the busiest intersection in the middle of campus. The following principles of the SOAR Institute were presented by Boylan at the 2011 Kellogg Institute with credit given to Casazza and Silverman (1996).

1. Accept students where they are and move them as far as they can go.
2. Assume that all students have the potential for growth.
3. Facilitate the transfer of knowledge to new learning situations.
4. Increase cognitive self-awareness.
5. Encourage students to gradually accept responsibility for their own learning.
6. Recognize that learning also includes affective development.
7. Envision all students as potential graduates.

Each principal is framed and displayed throughout the SOAR Institute space.

Tutoring Services

Before SOAR, tutoring at the college was a secondary duty given to a department with other demanding responsibilities. Tutoring was sporadically available for students but with no tracking of student demand or training of tutors. Providing expanded tutoring services for all students at the college was one charge of SOAR. In 2011, college personnel attended trainings by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) and the Association for Tutoring Professionals (ATP). Subsequently, tutor training began in fall 2011 as did tracking of students who came for tutoring. Additional tutors were hired, the number of hours tutors were available for students was expanded, and a tutor supervisor was put in place to oversee tutoring services.

SOAR Tutoring Services (STS) utilizes a drop-in tutoring system which has worked well. The number of tutors has expanded from five to an average of thirty per semester. The number of hours tutors are available to students has grown from a few hours a week to fifty-two hours a week. Math and writing tutors have the greatest demand, and at least one tutor for each of these areas is always available for students. STS makes it a priority to utilize a variety of tutors: undergraduate students, adjunct instructors, graduate students, and retired educators. This diversity enables students at Shelton State to find a tutor with whom they can connect. STS now averages forty-four tutor sessions per day each fall semester and thirty-two sessions per day each spring semester.

In 2013, STS received Level I certification through the College Reading and Learning Association's International Tutor Training Program (ITTPC). This certification signifies that the tutoring program at Shelton State meets national standards for tutor training, data collection, and program elements. In 2015, STS received Level 2 certification from ITTPC, and Level 1 certification has been extended to 2017.

STS has expanded to include additional services. Student Success Seminars are held twice per week on topics such as "Student Survival Kit," "Communicating with Faculty and Staff," "Study Tips," "Overcoming Test Anxiety," "Time Management," "Stress Management," "Managing Personal Finances," and "Test Taking Tips." Attendance at these seminars varies. Sometimes a coach will bring an entire ball team, an instructor will bring an entire class, or an instructor will ask that the seminar be presented during a specific class time. Other times, only one or two students attend. No matter how many attend, feedback

from students has indicated that the sessions are providing valuable assistance. As a result, SOAR staff have decided the time invested is worth the effort. Another opportunity for students provided by SOAR Tutoring Services is placement test help sessions. Students who have yet to take COMPASS or who wish to retest are encouraged to attend a two-hour session held once weekly for reading, writing, and mathematics. Tutors with teaching experience conduct the help sessions. "Technology Basics," offered once per week for an hour, gives students a chance to get hands-on assistance using technology. This service is especially helpful to more mature, non-traditional students who might not be familiar with using computers. Assistance with setting the margins and font for a paper, attaching a document to an email, and other basic tasks using technology are addressed. Assistance with navigating software used in developmental courses is also provided as needed.

Intrusive Advising with T.I.D.E.S.

One thing separating SOAR from some developmental programs is the advising model utilized. Within six months of the director of SOAR being named, three navigators were hired to advise developmental students placing into at least two developmental courses. Navigators follow an intrusive advising model, "Targeted Intervention for Developmental Education Students" (T.I.D.E.S) (Boylan, 2009). An example of intrusive techniques used by navigators includes placing a registration hold on a student's account. This mandates that students meet for advisement before registration opens each semester. It also forces a conversation when students want to drop a class. This practice has resulted in numerous situations in which students benefitted, not only due to the advising that took place, but also in relation to financial aid matters. Another example of intrusive advising occurs when students do not return phone calls or emails. When this happens, navigators find students either before or after class; this contact holds the students accountable.

The process used by navigators begins when students take the placement test. Immediately after testing, students meet with their assigned navigator. This initial meeting between students and navigators includes sharing contact information, and if time allows, discussing general information about Shelton State and the courses students should take during their first term. When registration opens, navigators follow up with students, offering registration assistance, to ensure they register for appropriate classes. Once classes begin, regular meetings with students begin. Most students meet with a navigator every two weeks. The first few meetings include signing a contract and goal-setting. An integral component of the navigator process includes completing a scripted, detailed

interview that asks non-cognitive questions. This profile allows navigators a glimpse into factors that often determine student success. (See Appendix A.)

When SOAR was created, the term navigators was specifically chosen to illustrate that these personnel would do more than traditional advising. Hiring the right individuals to serve as navigators is critical. They must demonstrate a desire to serve others, understand that being a cheerleader for students is vital, and be willing to go beyond giving assistance on course selection. Within a year of implementation, navigators were being referred to as life coaches, mentors, "advisors on steroids," and "a personal GPS for college students." With the college maintaining an average of 65% of incoming freshmen placing into developmental courses in 2010 and 2011, three additional navigators were hired in 2012.

Navigators email instructors with the names of the navigators' students in their particular classes at the start of each term. Instructors then know whom to contact with concerns, this contact opening the door to communication between instructors and navigators. Another method of communication is via progress reports that instructors complete three times per semester. Students receive the progress reports from navigators and are responsible for getting the reports completed by their instructors.

The feedback from students and instructors on the navigator process has been positive. A student who graduated in May 2015 stated, "The SOAR Institute has been a tremendous help to my success at Shelton State, especially considering I had been out of school for 25 years. There were so many times I wanted to give up when things got hard, but my navigator would not let me quit. I believe every student should take advantage of the services the SOAR Institute has to offer, especially the navigators and tutors."

Instruction

Support for instructors is the third component of SOAR. Numerous professional development training events have been provided for faculty, including adjunct faculty. The participation and enthusiasm at these trainings has been encouraging. Sample topics have included "Helping Students with Math Anxiety," "Working with Veteran Students," "Students with Disabilities," "International Students and Writing," and "Brain Friendly Learning."

Courses currently taught under the umbrella of the SOAR Institute include "Orientation to College" as well as study skills courses. The one-credit hour orientation course "Orientation to College" is required for any student wishing to earn a credential. Students who place into two or more developmental courses take a three-hour,

non-credit-bearing study skills course which meets twice per week. Sample topics covered include note-taking skills, test-taking skills, time management, communication, test anxiety, memory techniques, and more. A one-credit hour study skills course, "College Study Skills," gives students an opportunity to bring materials from classes and get assistance in organizing notes and preparing for tests.

After two years of research, study, and preparation by the director of SOAR and two instructors, a redesign of developmental mathematics at Shelton State began with the 2014 fall term. In this model, classes meet in computer labs where instructors teach content daily with computer-based assignments used for practice and assessment. Students may take a pre-test for a unit and move ahead to the next unit if the score is at least 80%. While working in a unit, students may work ahead if desired. Students who do not turn in assignments on time are required to visit the math lab for tutoring until they are back on track. Students are also encouraged to go to the math lab for tutoring as needed.

After one semester of the redesigned model, pass rates in developmental math courses rose 14%. (See Appendix B.) Progress still needs to be made, but early results demonstrate that the tide is changing and students are experiencing more success in mathematics.

Instructors in the Language Arts department are working to implement an integrated reading and writing course. The college currently offers one level of developmental reading and two levels of developmental English. The integrated course will replace the upper level developmental English course and the reading course.

In the summer of 2016, SOAR collaborated with the Adult Education Department to offer a summer fast track for students who tested into any developmental course. After taking the college placement test, COMPASS, participating students took the Test of Adult Basic Education to confirm eligibility for the fast track. This was followed by students working through the Adult Education curriculum. Students attended class four hours per day, four days a week for one month. During this time, they concentrated on completing lessons on one subject area: mathematics, reading, or writing. Results of that program are not yet available.

Reaching out to High Schools

During the 2015-16 academic year, a representative of SOAR visited high schools in the service area of Shelton State to share "College Knowledge and the Keys to Student Success." (See Appendices C and E.) Supported by grant funds, the goal of this endeavor was to help better prepare students for the transition from high school to col-

lege by providing more information than is typically given in recruiting visits. In fall 2015, seniors in the college's service area heard this information and received related materials. In spring 2016, the information was shared with high school juniors.

Future Plans

The SOAR Institute staff is working on additional opportunities for students. A student organization, Emerging Scholars, is being planned and will launch soon. This program will recognize students who have taken developmental courses and earned a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher, and will function as other student organizations on campus.

Conclusion

The SOAR Institute is now a model developmental education program in the state of Alabama. In the five years SOAR has been in existence, sixteen colleges have sent teams to tour and learn more. Several colleges have implemented at least one component of SOAR at their institutions. Recent policy approved for the Alabama Community College System reflects the advising guidelines and philosophy used in SOAR. While this is exciting and validating, the most rewarding thing about what SOAR is doing has been reflected in the feedback received from students and parents. SOAR staff have numerous success stories and share them regularly. The following message from a parent who emailed a navigator sums it up well. "Thank you for being such a blessing to my daughter. When she was struggling through high school, we never dreamed she would want to go to college, much less be excited about it and be able to succeed as much as she has! You all at the SOAR Institute are such a compassionate group of people, and the support you provide for students who, like my daughter, have learning challenges, is invaluable! Thank you for the wonderful work you do!"

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Appendix A: Interview Script used by Navigators

Student Profile Sheet

1. **Background Information**
   A. Why are you going to college? Have you been to college before? Let's check your transcripts.
   B. What is your program of study?
   C. Do you have a program of study checklist or STARS Guide?
   D. What do you feel is your strongest subject?
   E. What do you feel is your weakest subject?
   F. Do you think your program of study matches your strengths and weaknesses?
   G. Have you served in the military?
   H. Do you see yourself graduating in this program of study from Shelton State?

2. **Time Management**
   A. Employment
      1. Do you have a job? If so, where?
      2. How many hours per week do you work?
      3. Will your employer work around your school schedule?
   B. Family Commitments
      1. Do you have children?
      2. Are you the caregiver for anyone else?
   C. Do you have any other commitments that require a lot of your time? (church, PTA, etc.)

3. **Resources**
   A. Transportation
      1. Where do you live?
      2. How do you get to Shelton State?
      3. Is transportation ever a problem?
   B. Financial Aid
      1. How are you paying for college?
      2. Have you completed the paperwork?
      3. How do you know you are receiving this aid?

4. **Miscellaneous**
   A. Are you a morning person?
   B. Are you a "people" person?
   C. Do you have test anxiety?
   D. Are you aware that we have an Office of Disability Services?
   E. What most scares you about college?
   F. What about college excites you most?
   G. What other information would you like me to know about you? For example, hobbies, interests, talents.
   H. If you have any learning disabilities or are in need of accommodations, please see the Office of Disability Services.
   I. *(if classes have not yet started)* Have you found the rooms for your classes?

   Our Next Meeting Time: _____

Appendix B: Developmental Mathematics Redesign

History—Status prior to Redesign

- Two, 4-hour math courses (090 and 098)
- Emporium model 2004 to 2008
- Average pass rate (from 2004 – 2012)

	Years	Combined Pass Rate	Passed 090	Passed 098
Fall 9-yr Average	2004 to 2012	32%	35%	29%
Spring 9-yr Average	2004 to 2012	29.5%	33%	26%

Redesign – Implemented Fall 2014

- Four, 2-hour courses (080, 090, 091, 092) set up in partial terms
- Two units/modules per course

	Combined Pass Rate	Passed 080	Passed 090	Passed 091	Passed 092
Fall 2014	46% (511/1116)	47% (192/403)	59% (110/186)	31% (127/414)	73% (82/113)
Spring 2015	45% (300/668)	41% (51/124)	47% (76/163)	43% (109/255)	51% (64/126)
Fall 2015	43% (393/906)	50% (18/36)	38% (145/386)	44% (127/288)	53% (103/196)
Spring 2016	45% (285/636)	38% (5/13)	33% (53/253)	54% (101/187)	52% (96/183)

The Next Course (Fall 2014 through Fall 2015)

- 59% (156/263) of students who enrolled in Intermediate Algebra (transferable, credit-bearing) after completing developmental math passed the course on the first attempt. This compares to a 43% pass rate in the same course for students who did not take developmental math courses.
- 68% (58/85) of students who enrolled in Technical Mathematics after completing developmental math passed the course on the first attempt.

Appendix C: College Knowledge

- College publications critical for student success include the Catalog, the Registration Guide or Schedule of Classes, and the Website. Students should familiarize themselves with the information found in these documents.

- Mandatory placement into courses is based on ACCU-PLACER, SAT, or ACT scores.

- A program of study includes the courses required to obtain a degree or certificate.

- The STARS guide shows courses transferring to four-year schools in Alabama.

- Registration is only available online; register early and pay in full before the deadline.

- Terms of enrollment: fall, late August through December; spring, January through mid-May; and summer, late May through mid-August.

- Classes are either full term and last the entire semester (approximately 16 weeks) or partial term and last for half of the semester (approximately 8 weeks). Partial terms are either during the first half or second half of a semester.

- When selecting classes, note the class location; some classes may be offered on different campuses.

- When registering for classes, the section numbers indicate the following: 01–49= full term day classes; 50's=-full term evening classes; 60's=first term; 70's=second term; 80's=online.

- Class meeting days are as follows: M=Monday, T=Tuesday, W=Wednesday, R=Thursday, F = Friday.

- Credit hours determine the length of a class.

- GPA stands for Grade Point Average and is determined by the grade earned in a course and the number of credit hours per course.

- Being a full-time or part-time student depends on many factors. For example, federal financial aid full-time is a minimum of twelve hours, whereas an academic scholarship requires more to be full-time.

- Drop/add is a period of time, usually within the first three days of a term, in which students can change their schedule without penalty. Refer to the Registration Guide or Schedule of Classes for details.

- Withdrawing from a class (dropping after drop/add) must be done by the published deadline each term. The course stays on the student transcript and a grade of "W" is assigned. This action can affect federal financial aid.

- Completely withdrawing from college requires meeting with an educational planner.

- Books and computer program/software access codes are required in many courses but are not provided. Tools for technical courses may also be required. Students must purchase these supplies.

- Every class has a syllabus and course outline. These documents provide important dates and policies related to the class.

- Final exam times are longer than normal class times. Final exams may be scheduled on a day and time that is different from the class time. Check each class syllabus for details.

- Class attendance is crucial. Be on time, stay the entire time, take notes, and participate actively in class.

- A student hour is a designated time and place during which instructors are available to help students.

- Communicate regularly with instructors. Let instructors know if you will be absent or need assistance.

- Support services include educational planning, the Office of Disability Services, Career Services Center, libraries, and tutoring.

- Check your email daily. Email is the official communication method of the College.

- No report cards are mailed. Check grades online.

Appendix D: Keys to Student Success

Key 1: Respect

One key to becoming a successful college student is to treat yourself, peers, faculty, and staff with high regard. Portray self-worth through your dress and behavior. Acknowledge others' ideas, opinions, and thoughts by listening before responding.

Key 2: Class Attendance

One key to becoming a successful college student is to attend required class time, which includes arriving on time and remaining until dismissed. Notify your instructors concerning excused absences or tardies. See instructors to make up missed work. Be prepared by completing assignments and by participating in class activities. Use class time effectively and efficiently.

Key 3: Study Habits

One key to becoming a successful college student is by adopting good study habits. Keep up with assignments, use available resources, and get help when needed. Be aware of how you study best. These habits can make learning new information both easier and quicker and will make study time far more effective and efficient.

Key 4: Communication

One key to becoming a successful college student is to use the appropriate method of communication (i.e. face-to-face meetings, phone calls, e-mails). Keep lines of communication open with faculty, staff, and peers. Communication involves asking questions, listening to understand others, observing, verifying information received, and sharing ideas. Use standard English in written and oral communication. Through communication, collaboration and cooperation occur.

Key 5: Time Management

One key to becoming a successful college student is to plan and manage how to spend each day, week, and month to achieve desired goals effectively. Maintaining a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly calendar is essential to managing time. Make a list of what needs to be accomplished, prioritize this list, and plan accordingly.

The keys to becoming a successful college student are broad ideals embraced by Shelton State Community College. The College has high expectations for your success, and provides resources whereby you can learn and grow. We challenge you to demonstrate student responsibility by making the decisions and taking the necessary actions to achieve your goals. Helping you achieve your goals is our highest priority.

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