Connecting the Dots: Preparing for the Underprepared

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Abstract

When academic success professionals work collaboratively with faculty, we can better connect the dots between how students present in the classroom and what services are most needed to support student success. If high school students believe academic records are irrelevant, it undermines the need (incentive) to exert effort in studies and academic habits. The result: institutions are forced to incorporate additional academic success services, as well as extended services provided through student affairs.

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Background

There is a lack of literature on the topic of unpreparedness in college; however, there appears to be ample literature that connects unprepared students to high school as well as parental higher education. Furthering on Goyette & Mullen (2006), Bourdieu & Passeron (1979) argue that a student's success in higher education is directly related to a parent's non-economic cultural habits as well as behaviors such as family background, commitment to education and social class.

According to the US Department of Education (2012), one half of the college student population consists of first-generation students. Tierney et al (2006), Pike & Kuh, (2005) and Warburton et al (2001) purport that first-generation students often come from a lower socio-economic background and may lack preparatory skills from parental modeling. A further point to consider is that business

students are more likely to come from a lower socio-economic status over those pursuing arts and sciences (Goyette & Mullen, 2006).

Against the systemic backdrop of the k-12 priority to 'teach to the test,' rather than learning how to learn, it is no wonder first-year college students drop out at such high rates. Especially when one takes a closer look at their profile. In their 2018 report, the Higher Learning Commission noted that today's students are "not just going to college, but working, raising families, and engaging with their communities." Further, the Lumina Foundation reported that 42% of first-year students are living near or below the poverty line, and the US Department of Education (2017) reports that 74% of all undergraduates have at least one nontraditional characteristic.

While Plavin-Masterman (2017) believes that no matter how much faculty or instructors discuss assignments and expectations, students always find ways to re-interpret them and either result in being unprepared or completing the wrong assignment. Conversely, Gabriel (2008) and Collier & Morgan (2008) purport that if faculty ensure additional time expressing their expectations of students, students will be better prepared and will deliver higher grades. However, if one supports Bourdieu's (1979) theory, no amount of discussion will provide clarity to the students.

According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2006), a rising number of unprepared students have enrolled in community college, which has resulted in the community college system needing to accommodate remedial courses for incoming students. They reported 29.6% of newly enrolled students were taking remedial math classes, 16.9% remedial English and 10.1% intensive reading (2006). This supports Bourdieu & Passeron (1979), Goyette & Mullen (2006) and Gabriel's (2008) theory that students are entering college today without adequate preparation to succeed; specifically, lacking skills in reading, writing and studying.

With students entering higher education unprepared, institutions are forced to incorporate additional accessibility services such as tutoring, writing, and math centers as well as extended services provided through the dean of students' office. While higher education institutions appear to be assuming additional

responsibilities and financial burdens, classroom teaching has not advanced at the rate of services needed (Dotzler, 2003).

Some argue that while millions buy into the education for all movement, tuition costs have gone up and institutions have not been able to keep up with demand. Additional arguments have appropriated the expectation of college for all which has seemingly caused a decline in motivation and incentive – two major proponents of social implication. According to the Wisconsin model in sociology, while students' aspirations are the central component of success, their family backgrounds and individual mental capacity highly influences their success rate (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). Dominica, Conley, and Farkas (2011) examine student motivation and incentive rates based on the 2009 speech of Barak Obama calling for the expansion of higher education and additional educational training for all. Following that, Goyette (2008) extends "nearly 85% of U.S. 10th graders say they plan to earn a bachelor's degree or higher, up from less than 45% in 1980." Some argue that while millions buy into the education for all movement, tuition costs have gone up and institutions have not been able to keep up with demand.

Rosenbaum (2001) suggests a perverse effect on this ethos with one of the most stunning statements; if high school students believe high school records are irrelevant given this new educational norm, it undermines the need and incentive to exert effort in their studies and academic habits. Further, he purports 40-50% of high school students believe there are no penalties or consequences associated with poor performance, as it is an expectation that they will move onto a 4-year degree-granting institution. Rosenbaum (2001) further states high school students lack the connection to their studies in high school and success in college. Based on several scholars, high school students are under the impression that low performers will still be rewarded with college opportunities, thereby prompting a lack of motivation to engage and study in preparation for college. This poses the question if the college for all ethos has had an adverse effect on high school teachers and students to properly prepare for advanced academics?

College readiness is both a long-term and short-term developmental matter. The 80/20 principle, credited to Italian

economist Vilfredo Pareto, is useful to help both faculty and students understand the breakdown of the onus for learning. In the K-12 system, teachers were responsible for 80% (or more) of their student's learning as measured through mandated testing. The student was only responsible for showing up. In higher education, that equation is flipped. The student is now responsible for (at least) 80% of their learning and will only get about 20% (at most) of content knowledge from classwork.

With students entering college at rates higher than ever before, the focus must shift from degree-granting to readiness for the academic journey as well as the journey of life. Given the shift society has endured over the past two decades with more students seeking a 4-year degree as a path to success and economic prosperity, preparation is more critical than ever before.

Proposed Solution

High school teachers spend large amounts of time throughout the academic year focusing on students passing or meeting the national standards testing. Since President Bush instituted "No Child Left Behind" there has been an institutional debate on preparedness and effectiveness. If K-12 teachers focus on exam scores, how are we preparing students for success: academic or otherwise?

The primary obstacle facing an educational shift is the strategy that is employed in the K-12 educational system that must move away from test-taking and lean into a content/skills approach. In addition to students needing basic time management skills, there are also other needs; to discover their learning style, to be held to standards of excellence, and they must understand that they are responsible for their actions/outcomes, including consequences that may follow.

Educators around the globe are experiencing frustration with younger generations who enter 4-year degree institutions unprepared. This unpreparedness isn't as much to do with laziness as it is to do with other moving parts. While the FBD presented embodies feedback from nine colleagues and 26 students where eight core categories were identified as factors of unpreparedness (Experience, Ownership of Learning, Un-Engaging Curricula, Time, Personality,

Peer Pressure, Professors, and Don't see the Relevance), it appears the core issue is larger than anticipated when I began examining the issue of unpreparedness of my students attending a small, private liberal arts institution in North Carolina.

When K-12 teachers focus on testing, they miss the opportunity to aid the students in true learning that consists of a foundational skillset of reading and processing materials according to their learning style. Mindless reading (Reichle et al, 2010) is simply reading words on a page, lacking comprehension or memory of the actual content. While Eason, et al (2012) and Lee & Shute (2010) affirm students with more astute metacognitive abilities tend to be higher learners and are better able to achieve higher standing; this does not correlate to their actual understanding of their learning styles or how to go about expressing or improving them.

Consider for a moment an individual with a learning style that is visual, and application-based. They may not learn through being talked (audio) at or read to, and possibly do not learn through test-taking as a result of a lecture (audio). Therefore, when tested, the learner does not personalize results, rather, they look to supplemental materials and ways in which their learning journey can be enhanced with the ultimate goal of improving test scores. Abbas (2012) contends that educators must first understand their learning style to understand a student's learning style and there is often a mismatch of styles potentially resulting in lower learner achievement.

Universal Design for Learning seeks to provide an academically accessible environment that is usable by all learners to the greatest extent possible and is built to accommodate individual learning differences and styles. Advances in technology over the last 20 years have led to huge advances in both neurological and learning sciences. Research has shown that the brain is made up of hundreds of thousands of neurological networks—each formed in response to the need for completing a task (Smith, 2003). For example, when given the command to 'cross your arms,' we complete the task in almost a reflex-like manner. Our brains process the command and then, through a series of neurological connections, the brain choreographs all the movements required to cross our arms. These neurological connections form a network designed to complete the task of

crossing one's arms—it becomes 'hardwired' in the individual's brain. Further, these networks are uniquely sequenced in each individual in the same manner as the uniqueness of our fingerprint. When asked to cross our arms the other way, there is processing delay as the task requires a different set of neurological connections to be made before the task can be completed.

When applied to the science of learning, these findings lend support to our understanding of how individuals learn. A learning environment designed to meet the needs of the 'average' learner fails to allow for learning variances and a jagged learning profile (CAST, 2014). For instance, a learner may be a very eloquent speaker with a tremendous vocabulary, yet consistently do poorly on written assignments. In this case, the learner will be at an academic disadvantage due to dyslexia in a course that is writing-intensive. With this in mind, the Universal Design for Learning framework embraces the variances in the individuals learning profile as yet another layer of depth to the diversity of who we are as being human.

Based on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and less directly, American Benjamin Bloom, the Universal Design for Learning framework has three guiding principles: Flexibility in Representation, the way knowledge, and information is shared; Flexibility in Expression, how the assessment of learning is measured; and Flexibility in Engagement, the ways that learners interact with the knowledge and information that sustains interest and persistence (Meyer, 2014). Dr. Leonard Sweet, former Vice President of Academic Affairs at Drew University describes today's college students as EPIC-- Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven, and Connected. Application of the Universal Design for Learning framework makes a great match for educating today's college students (Elmore, 2013). It is worth noting that in the United States, the Universal Design for Learning framework is increasingly incorporated in our public education system, and as these students begin to consider college, their families are looking for similar educational environments for their students.

Universal Design for Learning is a framework, not a protocol, meaning that traditional lecture and exam modalities will remain a part of the framework. The difference in design when applying the

principles of UDL to a course is that lecture and exams are but one way the material is conveyed. A course can be planned to include an exam, a paper, a presentation, and a project—all weighted equally, as means by which students can demonstrate what they have learned. By incorporating these various assessment methods into a course, more students have a better opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned in ways that best suit their learning profile. This design represents the shift from a structure that accommodates weaknesses to a structure that enables strengths and allows the individual to be an individual. While it doesn't accommodate individualized needs, it enables individualized learning styles that show comprehension of the material at hand. For example, a dyslexic student may struggle to take a traditional written exam or writing a paper, but because of their dyslexia, the student may have developed excellent oral presentation skills, or possess the ability to create remarkable projects that can be used to assess their grasp of the material being covered. By designing learning environments that allow students to work to their strengths, we provide greater opportunities for all learners to develop competence, confidence, and independence.

Multiple courses of action are necessary. First, there should be collaborative initiatives towards what those at the college/university level can do to effect change and get students up to speed; second, establishing supportive standards for students to improve their overall success rates; and finally, engaging in additional scholarly work to examine the exact breakdown in rigorous academic preparation so that necessary changes may be made. It is evident from the research that if students are not prepared for college, they have a higher risk of dropping out or failing which ultimately impacts their ability to achieve economic success.

Consider the work of Bourdieu & Passeron (1979) who operate on the premise that behaviors are non-economic based and more to do with factors of social life, familial life, status quo, and upbringing. With that being said, the varying generations within our society have their history, value-shaping experiences and motivational patterns. The striking difference in the mindsets, motivations, and behaviors of these generations in the workforce has the potential to bring both challenges and opportunities to the organizations they serve.

Take the Millennial Generation; it has been shaped by the events of the Desert Storm, the Columbine shootings, the Clinton sex scandals, and 9/11 (Zemke et al., 2000). Further, the Millennial Generation came of age in a period of cell phones and the Internet; essentially, they grew at the rate of technology. With that said and understanding that their medium has been ever-changing; this may provide insight into why their learning styles seem to challenge the age-old norms. The only reality this generation has ever known is that of an online, networked society in which everyone is connected to everyone else and information is but a few keystrokes away (Oreg, 2003).

Intuition and enrollment dependent institutions, as White (2016) states, "We must abandon once and for all the college-ready paradigm that has allowed higher education to deflect accountability. It is time that we fully embrace the burden of being student-ready institutions." When Faculty collaborate with the Academic Success Professionals on their campuses, the partnership can help transform the classroom experience for both the faculty member and their students. Indeed, as David Kirp points out in his book, The College Dropout Scandal, students need to know that their faculty and the institution 'has their back' (page 4).

Helping faculty and students gain a better understanding of how students learn is a benefit of working with Academic Success Professionals. While faculty are experts in the content areas, most doctoral programs do not include any kind of pedagogical training, as they focus more on research. In contrast, professionals working in Academic Success often have extensive training in the science of learning, curriculum development, student development, higher education administration, and financial management.

Systemically, this is a complex issue. Organizationally, if faculty unite as an inter-disciplinary front, it is possible to impact the students' outcomes. Collectively, we must make students accountable beginning in their First-Year Seminar (FYS) course as freshmen, through graduation. As a united faculty we must help students understand they have choices, however, there are always consequences to follow. (Example: I assess learning through research papers, presentations, and projects. On presentation day

when class begins at 8 am, I lock the door promptly at 8 and do not allow students entry to the class. They receive a zero (0) and are not granted a make-up opportunity. This is to teach responsibility, accountability, and ownership while preparing them for the working world. Behaviors historically provide insight into ways all learners perceive and respond to the environment: the place where learning occurs, within respective learning styles (Celce-Marcia, 2001).

Another solution organizationally would be a series of seminars aimed at establishing a solid foundation. They might include:

1. Learning Styles: What are They?
2. Time Management Skills and Why They're Important
   a. What's important and what's not
3. Strategic Planning for Homework
   a. It Begins with an Outline
   b. Concept Mapping
4. Managing Athletics and Academics
5. Breaking the Cycle - Owning Up
   a. Decision Making
6. Personal and Academic Responsibility: Why They Matter
7. Motivate, Not Procrastinate

In support of the proposed programming, Abbas (2012) exerts the necessity of multiple learning opportunities that enforce learning styles, strengthen core abilities, overcome weaker skills and pave the path for effective learning. Further, the programming is supported under the self-regulated learning research that identifies goal setting, planning, motivation and self-monitoring as a pathway to engage students in achieving higher levels and to learn more effectively (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). Systemically, we need to make appropriate adjustments to help this generation of young adults and the generations after them to be prepared for academic success that hopefully translates to economic prosperity.

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