

Learning Center Issues, Then and Now: An Interview with Frank Christ

By Barbara J. Calderwood

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Christ using an Osborne 1, the first successful portable computer, introduced in 1981.



Frank Christ today

Frank Christ is the founder and co-director of the Winter Institutes for Learning Assistance Professionals and has been actively involved with learning assistance and learning centers for the past 40 years. He was the founder and past coordinator (1972-1990) of the award-winning Learning Assistance Support System at CSULB. Frank is also a founder and past president of the Western College Reading Association, now known as the College Reading and Learning Association. His numerous editorial contributions include the WCRA Proceedings, New Directions for Learning Assistance series (Jossey-Bass), founding columnist of "Techtalk," editor for learning skills booklets and Starting Up A Learning Assistance Center: Conversations with CRLA Members Who Have Been There and Done That (H & H Publishing Company), and founder and content editor of LSCHE, the learning support center Web portal. In addition, Frank has authored or coauthored more than a dozen books including 100 Things Every Online Student Ought to Know (Cambridge Stratford Ltd.) and Online Skills & Strategies Handbook (Allyn & Bacon). Christ was inducted as a Fellow of the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations in 2000.

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Barbara Calderwood (B.C.): Over the 20+ years I have known you, Frank, you have maintained that LACs ought to serve the entire campus community, from underprepared students to honors students as well as faculty, staff, and administrators. How do learning centers today

differ from those with which you were associated at the beginning of your career?

Frank Christ (F.C.): Most learning centers did not then and do not now serve entire campus communities, although, as a comprehensive center, the Learning Assistance Center at California State University Long Beach (CSULB; 1973-89) did by conducting workshops for faculty, senior administration, and campus staff. Most learning centers focused on remediation in those early years. Today, although most learning centers do not serve faculty, campus staff, and administrators, they have moved away from a focus on remediation to content assistance through tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, and study strategies development as well as increased effectiveness and efficiency.

Another difference today is the use of technology. Centers now can easily capture, analyze, and report usage data with available software such as *Accutrak* and *TutorTrac*. In addition, centers have Web sites to publicize programs and services and some centers offer study skills surveys and links to Web sites for study skills handouts. Staff training is more pervasive due to the availability of listservs such as LRNASST, Web sites like LSCHE (both of which focus exclusively on learning support in higher education), and online graduate courses.

B.C.: What are the main difficulties and problems that learning centers are facing today?

F.C.: I can think of seven problems that reflect a lack of learning center identity and recognition; this scarce recognition results in a minimal political voice for learning centers in higher education.

1. Lack of recognition by higher education associations like ASHE (Association for the Study of Higher Education), Educause, NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators), NISOD (National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development), POD (Professional and Organizational Development), and STLHE (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education) due primarily to an absence of research and publications in the journals that faculty

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- and administrators read and judge to be important publications of higher education.
2. Lack of experience and training of many learning center directors to manage programs and services.
 3. Inadequate publicity and public relations both institutionally and nationally. For example, it is only recently that the journals of CRLA and NCLCA have become a part of *Higher Ed Abstracts* which reaches faculty and senior administrators.
 4. Inadequate partnering with other campus programs, such as teaching and learning, faculty development, continuing education, distance education, and alumni.
 5. Lack of presentations by learning center professionals at technology conferences like Syllabus, TechEd, and Merlot and at corporate training conferences like American Society for Training & Development and the American Management Association.
 6. Not enough collaborative action among the four national associations that serve learning assistance professionals (Association for the Tutoring Profession, ATP; College Reading and Learning Association, CRLA; National Association for Developmental Education, NADE; and National College Learning Center Association, NCLCA), even with the efforts of the CLADEA (Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations) and the Blue Ribbon Commission to do so.
 7. Inadequate representation by learning center administrators on campus key committees like retention, orientation, and distance education.

B.C.: In the previous interview, you claimed a distinguishing characteristic of the LAC was its extensive use of technology and that “everybody today lives with technology.” Has the curve of acceptance/integration of technology been any steeper than you thought in 1979? Also, have new challenges come to light over the years related to the use of technology by learning center staff and patrons?

F.C.: In 1993 the World Wide Web (WWW) truly began, almost 15 years after the 1979 interview in this publication. Before that, however, the CSULB staff used PLATO’s commercially developed software to text message with colleagues around the world, and the center offered LAC students an opportunity to work with PLATO tutorials. Today, almost every learning center has computers available for staff and student use. Before 1985, very little computer software was commercially available to manage learning and to evaluate center data, although the LAC at CSULB developed and used a barcode system to

track attendance, use of materials, and tutoring.

Web 2.0, with blogs, podcasting, Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, and social networking through MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter; virtual worlds like *Second Life*; and video sharing on YouTube, TeacherTube, and YouTube.edu only became a reality about 2004. My observations—based on attendance at association conferences, reading listerv posts on LRNASST, and accessing learning assistance blogs—leads me to believe that these useful social media tools are either unknown or, if known, unused by learning assistance professionals.

By the way, 4 years after the 1979 interview, I initiated a technology column, “Techtalk,” in what was then the *Journal of Developmental & Remedial Education* (JD&RE). I continued writing it until 1987 when I turned it over to its current author, David Caverly, who has been its author ever since. Also, in 1996, Rick Sheets, Paradise Valley Community College, and I developed a Web site that focused exclusively on

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resources for learning support centers in higher education. LSCHE currently totals 60 Mb in 2,500 files. In 1994, Guillermo Uribe, then the Learning Center Director at University of Arizona, developed LRNASST, a listserv for learning assistance personnel in higher education. In 2003, the listserv was moved to the University of Florida and managed by Winifred Cooke. LRNASST-L currently has over 1330 members, with 1300 from the USA.

On a positive note, learning centers currently are using the WWW that became available in 1983 in many ways. For example, the Internet is used for publicity with more than 1000 institutional Web sites that can be viewed in LSCHE and for data collection through commercial software such as *TutorTrac* and *Accutrak*. It is also used to administer diagnostic surveys such as the *Learning and Study Strategies Inventory* (LASSI) or the *Study Behaviors Inventory* (SBI) as well as for tutorials in math, writing, and content delivered on CD or DVD and with Web-based services.

Some learning center staff are taking advantage of the specialized technology hands-on training at the annual Technology Institute for Developmental Educators (T.I.D.E.) weeklong institutes at Texas State University. Universities

like Grambling State University offer graduate programs online with courses in managing learning centers and facilitating college study strategies, and the Association for the Tutoring Profession offers online training modules. However, although podcasting is used by teaching faculty to deliver course content, there is little evidence that learning centers are podcasting their workshops for student use, and very few centers offer online workshops (video) for their students. Also, I have not found a learning center that has an RSS feed to its Web site nor that learning centers are using MySpace, Twitter, or Wikis. Few have a presence in Virtual Worlds like *Second Life* or do video sharing on YouTube.edu.

Based on my observations, I feel that learning assistance associations are not using current technology as much as they could for staff training, in their programs and services, and to achieve recognition on campus.

B.C.: Specifically, research has shown that underprepared college students often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and have limited access to technology and the Internet. What are your thoughts on this issue?

F.C.: Although some research studies have shown that underprepared college students often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and have limited access to technology and the Internet, there is little excuse that young Americans are not educationally computer literate at the same level as they are on their iPods and iPhones. In addition, students have access to computers in learning centers, in campus computer commons, and also to campus help desks and technology tutorials. What seems to be lacking is leadership by learning assistance associations to focus on and provide technology workshops at their conferences and through association webinars.

B.C.: Nancy Spann (1979) indicated that you described the LAC in your writings as “synergistic, cybernetic, and mathemagenic.” Can you define these terms? Are they still relevant today, and how do they apply to the 21st Century LAC?

F.C.: These three terms are more relevant today than they were 30 years ago when I described them in the Spann interview. Synergistic refers to a learning center as a one-stop shop for services and referrals. This synergism is becoming more pervasive as administration looks at the return on investment (ROI) for all student services.

Cybernetic means a concern for and emphasis on feedback, not only from learning center clients but also from learning center staff, on its mission, goals, and objectives. It is increasingly

important, now and in the foreseeable future, as administration demands evaluation of learning center programs and services. And with current technology and Web 2.0 tools, feedback (cybernetic) from learning center users can be pervasive and useful to learning center staff, particularly in learning center annual year reports.

Mathemagenic still means focusing on action and implementation rather than on just knowing about learning and study strategies. It increases a center's emphasis on learner activity both for individual and group assistance. It also fits well in the current learner-centered environment in higher education.

B.C.: What are the common grounds for LACs and DE programs that have surfaced over these past 3 decades?

F.C.: One common ground that is a challenge for both learning centers and developmental programs is the growth of online courses and number of students, including developmental education students, enrolled in them. However, it would seem that learning centers either are not involved with distance education or that distance education services are not aware of the usefulness of learning center capabilities. Center resources can help online course instructors integrate learning and study strategies in online courses or instructors can even recommend the learning center to students in their course syllabi.

Another common ground is the availability of learning center information on the LSCHE Web site and the use of the listserv, LRNASST, to communicate with colleagues about problems and solutions. Also, graduate programs like the one at Grambling State, the Kellogg Institutes at Appalachian State University, the learning center professional Winter Institutes, and the NCLCA Summer Institutes have done much to increase the professionalism of learning center and developmental education faculty, administrators, and staff.

B.C.: In the 1979 JD&RE interview, the importance of evaluation to a "systems approach" was stressed. In the years since the original interview, the application of standards to the profession has expanded (CAS standards, CRLA's tutor program certification, NADE's program certification, NCLCA leadership certification, etc.). Do such standards and certifications dovetail with a systems approach as you envision/describe it?

F.C.: Absolutely. A systems approach is only successful when it recognizes and follows standards and certification requirements such as those disseminated by CAS (Council for the Advancement of Standards) and certification

programs of NCLCA, NADE, and CRLA. These standards ought to underlie a learning center's mission, goals, and objectives. A revisit to my 1971, 1980, and 1997 articles, "Systems for Learning Assistance: Learners, Learning Facilitators, and Learning Centers," "Learning Assistance at a State University: A Cybernetic Model," and "Using MBO to Create, Develop, Improve, and Sustain Learning Assistance Programs," all referenced in LSCHE (www.pvc.maricopa.edu/~lsche/), will show that these standards are important to a systems approach. Being accountable by using a management system like MBO (Management By Objectives) which is synergistic and cybernetic will impress campus administration with a center's use of available resources and its emphasis on feedback and outcomes.

B.C.: What role do LACs play or how do they "fit" in the current higher education environment, calling for greater levels of accountability

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for all institutional operations?

F.C.: If a learning center has a published mission and goals as well as objectives that are shared with senior administration and documented using a management system like MBO, it will meet its institutional standards which focus on accountability, maximum use of allocated resources, and a perceivable increase in student retention and academic success. Research has consistently indicated that programs and services of campus learning centers have been a strong partner of retention services as evidenced by reviewing LSCHE resources for program justification. However, more research on the role of campus learning centers needs to be published and disseminated that indicates the role of learning centers in student retention and academic success. This research ought to be published in national journals rather than only in association publications so that higher education will recognize the value of learning centers for student retention and academic success.

B.C.: A recent study in the *Journal of Developmental Education* (Roselle, 2008) focused on community college librarian involvement with

campus learning assistance centers and developmental faculty/courses. In your previous interview you addressed issues related to the best location and environment for a LAC: Is a library setting appropriate to your ideal physical environment? Additionally, you have advocated for a centralized delivery center for learning assistance services. Has the fact that colleges and universities now have computer labs located at multiple sites across campus changed your thinking on this topic?

F.C.: Not at all. I still believe and have consistently advocated that the campus library is an ideal location for a centralized learning center and its programs and services. I am finding that there is a movement toward having a learning center as a part of a campus Teaching and Learning Center. Also, some learning centers have become an integral part of a campus learning commons where related services are housed and administered. Susan Deese, both a campus librarian and learning center director at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, was a pioneer in advocating that learning centers ought to partner with campus libraries.

B.C.: What trends in learning centers today do you consider most promising? What mistakes are practitioners making?

F.C.: I see movement toward inclusion in campus learning commons; certification of learning center staff (NCLCA), center tutoring programs (CRLA), and tutors (ATP and NADE); and interest in best practices of learning center and developmental programs and services as current positive trends. They promise increased service to learning center clients and recognition by campus senior administrators of the value of learning centers to student retention.

I do not see learning center staff making any more mistakes than teaching faculty. Both need to place emphasis on metacognition, brain research for learning, and use of social media. However, I do not see learning center staff researching and publishing in peer-reviewed national journals as much as faculty. This lack of research and publication inhibits recognition of learning center effectiveness by faculty and senior administration.

B.C.: Have your stated dreams for Learning Assistance Centers come to fruition? If they have, in what ways? What are your dreams for the 21st Century?

F.C.: In some ways, yes, my dreams have come true. Learning assistance professionals have an active listserv, LRNASST; a 24/7 Web site, LSCHE; an annual technology training event, Technology Institute for Developmental Educa-

tors; and a renewed interest in standards, certification, and best practices.

In other ways, no. More training is needed for learning center administrators in management, computer technology, and use of social media. More research and publication is needed as evidence of the value of learning centers to student retention and academic success. There needs to be more emphasis on public relations and publicity, both on campus and nationally, to achieve recognition that learning centers are an integral campus service. Learning centers need to impact distance education by integrating learning and study strategies assistance for all students.


And finally, if learning centers and their programs and services are to be recognized as integral to student retention and academic success, learning assistance associations need to place increased emphasis and resources on staff training in management, research and publication, technology, social media, and achieving national recognition.

B.C.: Perhaps your dreams for the learning assistance profession that have not yet come to fruition will be realized in the 21st Century, Frank!

Thank you so much for sharing your unique insights—gleaned from your pioneering efforts

with learning assistance and decades of research and experience in the profession—with me and JDE readers.

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NADE News

By Dr. Karen Patty-Graham, NADE President

The NADE Executive Board hopes you attended NADE 2009 in Greensboro, North Carolina and connected with colleagues interested in promoting student success in higher education. Thanks to conference cochairs Hilda Barrow and Darlene Smith-Worthington and the many volunteers, presenters, and attendees who made the conference a success.

We invite you to submit proposals for NADE 2010, to be held March 10-13, 2010, in Columbus, Ohio. The conference theme, “Discovering Success,” encourages you to share research, teaching, and learning strategies through proposals for concurrent sessions, pre- and postconference institutes, and poster sessions. Proposal forms, due by June 30, 2009, are on the conference Web site at www.nade.net.

Outgoing NADE President Rosemary Karr installed 2009-2010 officers in Greensboro. New President-elect Marcella Davis, Madisonville Community College, KY, is liaison to NADE's 30 chapters. Jeanine Lewis, Aims Community College, CO, was reelected NADE treasurer. She maintains and monitors NADE finances as well as works with the NADE auditor and conference treasurer. Betty Black, recently retired from Texas A & M University-Kingsville, serves as board secretary. Joyce Brasfield Adams, Hinds Community College, MS, continues as vice president. She assists

the Board to determine annual conference sites and serves as liaison with conference planners. As current NADE president, I am liaison to SPIN and committee coordinators, other NADE leaders, and leaders of reciprocal organizations.

Elisa Cohen, NADE elections committee chair, is accepting nominations for 2010-2011 president-elect, vice president, and secretary. If you are interested in serving on the Board or if you would like to nominate someone, consult the NADE homepage for position descriptions and nomination forms. Nominations close September 15, 2009.

We invite you to get involved in NADE. NADE is sponsoring a project, “Beyond Empirical Evidence,” to recognize students and communicate to administrators and legislators the faces of student success. The student nomination form is on the NADE homepage. We hope you will connect with a NADE Special Professional Interest Network (SPIN) to communicate with others who share your professional interests. Additionally, take advantage of NADE award and scholarship opportunities; most deadlines are September 15, 2009.

For additional information about NADE, please consult the Web site at www.nade.net.

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