RiLADE

Research in Learning Assistance and Developmental Education

A publication of

CLADEA
Council of Learning Assistance and
Developmental Education Associations

Seven Higher Education Trends Shaping the Future of Learning Assistance

By Hunter R. Boylan and Jennifer M. Haley

Colleges and universities face a variety of pressures from external trends. These trends tend to "trickle down" to learning assistance programs in expected and unexpected ways. Sometimes they are manifest, sometimes they are subtle. Whether we like it or not, we will be required to respond to whatever trends our campuses choose to engage. This issue of *RiLADE*, therefore, is devoted to an assessment of trends that may affect higher education in general and learning assistance in particular during the coming years.

Methodology

The authors reviewed the higher education media over a period of four months from October, 2022, through January 2023. The media included *Lumina News*, *Inside Higher Education*, *Diverse*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as well as a variety of other publications cited in these outlets. Articles in the media were analyzed to determine what the higher education news was reporting as issues, problems, and responses. From these, a series of trends was identified. A trend was considered to be a set of potential changes in the higher education landscape that would affect learning assistance and developmental education programs.

To qualify for inclusion, a trend had to meet the following criteria:

1. It had to be relevant to learning assistance,
2. it had to be written about in at least three different publications,
3. it had to have appeared in a reputable publication, and
4. it had to be cited in at least six different articles during the four-month period under consideration.

News articles that met these requirements were reviewed again to determine how they might affect learning assistance and developmental education.

Findings

Student Mental Health

      Among the major concerns of higher education administrators and policy makers during the period under consideration was student mental health (Alonso, 2022; Marijolovic, K. 2023). Some of this was stimulated by an increase in student violence (Hidalgo Bellows (2022, November 17). Concern for student mental health was also generated by studies and reports produced by various higher education groups. A recent report by NASPA, for instance, pointed out that the overwhelming majority of student affairs administrators believed that student mental health had declined in the past year (NASPA, 2023).

      The consensus among the news media was that everyone in colleges and universities needed to be involved in the quest for improved student mental health. This has relevance for learning assistance programs because they involve direct provision of services and support to students. As a result, learning assistance programs will experience greater pressure to contribute to promoting campus mental health.

      Many campuses are putting together Crisis Response teams to address student mental health. Learning assistance programs can respond to this trend by developing contacts with college, university, and community mental health programs to determine how they might support existing campus and community mental health efforts generally and behavioral incidents in particular (Hidalgo Bellows, 2022). Learning center staff often have people with counseling degrees or courses. If your campus is putting together a Crisis Response Team, learning center staff should be on it. Learning centers can also provide training to program staff on ways of identifying mental health issues and making appropriate referrals.

Student Completion

      Persistence and completion remain high on the agenda of colleges and universities. This is particularly true for students of color and other underserved populations (Beck, 2022). Of those black students who entered community college in 2016, only 31% had graduated by 2022 (Geary, C. 2022). Meanwhile, colleges and universities have apparently re-discovered that retaining students is more profitable and doable than simply replacing students who leave. It is worth noting that we have known and discussed this for the past three decades (Saluri, Noel, & Levitz, 1986). But losses in student enrollment owing to COVID and other factors have caused college and university administrators to re-learn the value of retention.

      As a result, any institutional organization that claims to support retention is likely to come under consideration by campus administrators (Armin Reema 2023; Geary, C.,2022). This creates opportunities, particularly for programs that have demonstrated through evaluation their contribution to student retention. Now is the time for programs that contribute to student retention to advertise their successes and seek additional institutional support. It also creates perils for those programs that cannot document their contribution to student retention.

      It will be important for programs to be able to demonstrate their contribution to helping underrepresented students succeed. Issues such as the multicultural competencies of staff, the presence of minority professionals, and the success of underrepresented students will be part of this success effort (Felix, 2022). Most of our programs have disproportionate representation of underserved groups, and our institutions need to recognize that, as a result, we have the strongest possibilities of promoting minority retention and graduation.

Coaching and Tutoring

      Coaching programs have been in place in business and industry for some time (Nigro, 2007; Parsloe & Leedham, 2009) but they are of relatively recent vintage on college and university campuses. Nevertheless, they are a response to very real student needs and the student mental health crisis noted above (Abdulahi, 2023; Sedlack, 2023). There is an increasing body of evidence that coaching programs are the most effective ways of communicating things like financial literacy, study strategies, and strategic learning techniques as well as advising and counseling information (Daloz, 2012; Blumenstyk, 2021;

Dorime-Williams, & Piancarte, 2022; News Staff, 2022). This, coupled with the crisis in student mental health, argues for increased efforts to connect with students through coaching (Dembicki, M., 2022).

Existing coaching programs involve regular meetings with students by trained staff, usually undergraduates, to help coach students through the rigors of college. Programs can be specific to coaching or they may be combined with tutoring or advising. It would be wise for learning assistance professionals to ask for funding or reorganize activities to provide coaching rather than let it be provided by some other unit on campus. If some other unit already provides this service, it would be equally wise to collaborate with it.

Food Insecurity

Goldrik-Rab (2018) was among the first to write about student food insecurity and bring the matter to the attention of policy makers and practitioners. As reported by Broton (2020), 47.2% of college students indicated that they were unsure where their next meal was coming from. Since then, food insecurity has become an increasingly important issue (Bloomberg, 2022; El Zein, A., Shelnutt, K.P., Colby, S., 2019; Gonzales, 2022).

Obviously, students who are hungry are unable to perform at their best academically. While learning assistance programs cannot resolve student food problems, they can contribute to their resolution by establishing food banks within their learning centers. They can also collaborate with existing food banks on or off campus.

Learning center staff can be a source of information about food assistance programs. For instance, Freudenberg, Goldrick-Rab, and Poppendiek (2019) report that the majority of students suffering from food insecurity are not even aware of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) -- formerly known as food stamps. Many local social service agencies also provide food assistance. All those working in learning assistance should be aware of the opportunities and requirements of these programs and be prepared to share this information with students.

Learning Assistance and Career Planning

The news articles reviewed reflected an increased concern over the quality of career advising received by undergraduates. Reed (2023) reported that 45% of undergraduates did not receive sufficient career advising to make intelligent decisions regarding the work force or job selection. Furthermore, parents are expressing greater concern over the pathways available to and through college (Deane, J., 2022). Improved career advising will be a priority on many college campuses.

At the same time, there are also calls to find new ways for accrediting what students already know (Jobs for the Future, 2022; Marshall, 2022). McCurtrie & Supiano, (2022) argue that alternative pathways to academic advising need to be found if colleges are to remain relevant to the work force. There are also calls for student support services to do a more intensive job of developing soft skills necessary for the work place (Dale Bloomberg, 2022).

These pressures will create opportunities and challenges for learning assistance programs. The opportunities may come through collaboration with the campus career planning center or the provision of internships for students interested in student affairs careers. Challenges may come from attempting to integrate career counseling into their academic services. This should, in no way, be taken to mean that learning centers should add career placement to their services without collaborating with existing career planning services.

Learning Assistance and Distance Learning

Serving Prison Populations

Colleges and universities have provided educational opportunity to incarcerated people for years. But a decline in student enrollment, particularly in community colleges, has forced many institutions to provide educational services in new venues (Vasquez, 2022). Prison populations offer one such opportunity for colleges and their learning assistance programs.

But as those who have already made a commitment to prison education have discovered, there is more to educating inmates than simply providing courses (Gellman, 2022). Academic advising, tutoring, counseling, and mentoring are all services that are needed by those incarcerated. This presents the opportunity for learning assistance programs to expand their services to a different clientele while, at the same time, accommodating college enrollment priorities.

One place to start is to find out what services are already offered to prison inmates. The likelihood is that there are learning assistance services that are not provided to this population. Because of the restrictions on those incarcerated, it is likely that these services will have to be provided online, which also may create a challenge for learning assistance programs. Whether learning assistance services are provided in person or online will depend upon factors such as distance, prison regulations, and the nature of the prison populations being served.

Distance Learning

COVID has forced many learning assistance programs to offer their services online (Ascione, 2023; D'Agostino, 2022, Blumenstyk, 2022). The pandemic has also forced some to investigate how well their online services are working (Ascione, 2023). This creates two sets of challenges for learning assistance programs. One is to deliver more of their services using online technology. Online platforms are now available for everything from tutoring to academic advising. It is important for learning assistance programs to choose their platforms wisely. Even the best online platforms are ineffective if they are used improperly. It is, therefore, important to select platforms for which staff may be easily trained. It is likely that the use of online platforms and artificial intelligence will enable us to personalize the student experience while improving services and even dealing with student mental health issues. But learning center staff will have to be well trained in their use in order for this to happen.

The other issue confronting learning assistance programs in the future is to evaluate the efficacy of these services. Fortunately, the Council for the Advancement of Standards has provided an excellent guide to evaluating learning assistance services (2011). It is recommended that this guide be used in program evaluation activities. Also, the Association for College Tutoring and Learning Assistance (2019) has provided a set of standards and practices for online tutoring that are applicable to almost any online learning assistance service. These standards provide a basis for evaluating the efficacy of online program delivery.

Conclusion

Trending issues in higher education such as student mental health, student retention and graduation, food insecurity, career planning, and distance learning all have the potential to exert pressure on learning assistance programs, as these programs are on the front line of delivering critical support and services to students. Learning centers may benefit from conducting SWOT analyses during annual strategic planning meetings to determine successful and proactive strategies. For example, specialized training and certification for online tutoring and coaching is recommended to strengthen virtual programming that for many centers was introduced during Covid and could use some refining. The formation of Crisis Response teams, or the inclusion of learning assistance staff on existing teams, is a critical step in providing wraparound services to students. Rigorous data analysis in terms of student persistence—and the learning center's role in retention and graduation—is an essential step to position the center as a vital partner in student success. Perhaps most importantly, meaningful and consistent communication and collaboration with constituents across campus ensures that the learning center is student-ready and focused on the current needs of today's students.

References

Abdulahi, S. (2023). New role brings more focus to student basic needs. *Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs.* https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/01/23/colleges-hire-directors-tackle-student-basic-needs?utm_source=Inside%2BHigher%2BEd&utm

Alonso, J. (2023). Colleges increasingly prioritize mental health, survey shows. *Inside Higher Education*. https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2023/01/18/colleges-increasingly-prioritize-mental-health-survey-shows

Armin, Reema (2023). Hochul's 2023 education agenda: High dosage tutoring, college access, student mental health. *ChalkBeat.* https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2023/1/10/23548585/hochul-ny-state-education-agenda-tutoring-student-mental-health-funding-college-access

Association for College Tutoring and Learning Assistance (2019). *Principle standards and effective practices for effective online tutoring*. http://actla.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ACTLA-Online-Tutoring-Standards_June-2020-1.pdf

Ascione, L. (2023). As acceptance grows six victories for online learning. *eCampus News.* https://www.ecampusnews.com/2023/01/03/as-acceptance-grows-here-are-6-areas-where-online-learning-is-making-strides/2/

Beck, C. (2022). Report calls for Indiana state leaders to address racial education achievement gaps. *Indianapolis Star*. https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2022/11/15/fairbanks-report-reduce-indiana-racial-education-achievement-gaps/69646385007/

Blumenstyk, G. (2021). Interactions with a mentor can help a student graduate: Here's how. Audio Podcast Episode, *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Blumenstyk, G. (2022). Getting comfortable with ed tech. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/the-edge/2022-10-26

Blumenstyk, G. (2018). Food insecurity on college campuses: Collateral damage of a societal crisis. *Journal of College and Character*, 19(4), 309-315.

Bloomberg, A. (2022). College students don't need lessons on hunger, too. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/college-students-dont-need-lessons-on-hunger-too/2022/10/08/3c0b7af4-4709-11ed-be17-89cbe6b8c0a5_story.html

Broton, K. (2020) Food insecurity in higher education. In K. Broton & C Cady (Eds.), *Food Insecurity on Campus: Action and Intervention*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

CAS Standards and Guidelines: Learning Assistance Programs (2011). COUNCIL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION (dmacc.edu)

Daloz, L. (2012). Mentoring: *Guiding the journey of adult learners*: San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Dembicki, M. (2022). How basic student needs outpace services at colleges. *Community College Daily*. https://www.ccdaily.com/2022/10/students-basic-needs-outpace-services-at-colleges/

El Zein, A., Shelnutt, K.P., Colby, S. *et al.* (2019). Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among U.S. college students: a multi-institutional study. *BMC Public Health* 19, 660. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6943-6

Felix, E.R. (2022). Taking educational equity to the next level. *Lake County Record-Bee*. https://www.aplu.org/our-work/1-driving-equitable-student-success/achieving-university-transformation-and-systemic-changes/center-for-public-university

Freudenberg, N., Goldrick Rab, S., Poppendiek, J. (2019). College students and SNAP: The new face of food insecurity in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*. 109(1), 1652-1658.

Geary, C. (2022). Community Colleges have a completion problem. *New America*. https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/community-colleges-have-a-completion-problem/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EdCentral+687&utm_content=EdCentral+687%2BCID_f65d63025859c64f405ee0b564ab064b&utm_source=Campaign+Monitor+Newsletters&utm_term=Community+Colleges+Have+a+Completion+Problem

Goldbrik-Rab, S. (2018). Who's hungry: Making sense of campus food insecurity estimates. Medium. https://saragoldrickrab.medium.com/whos-hungry-making-sense-of-campus-food-insecurity-estimates-4b65cd1ecf2c#:~:text=The%20preponderance%20of%20existing%20evidence,them%20deal%20with%20food%20insecurity

Herbert, J., & DeBurro, J. (2022). More than just more counselors. *Inside Higher Education*. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/09/28/adding-counselors-wont-solve-mental-health-crisis-opinion

Hidalgo Bellows, K. (2022). More campuses are hiring crisis response teams for mental health emergencies. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/more-colleges-are-hiring-crisis-response-teams-for-mental-health-emergencies

Hidalgo Bellows, K. (2022). When a student turns violent colleges turn to threat assessment teams. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/professional-development/events/the-chronicles-strategic-leadership-program-department-chairs?cid=cs-che-cpd-hat

Jobs for the Future (2022). A universe of possibilities. *Jobs for the Future*. https://expandopportunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ASA_JFF_Universe-of-Possibilities Market-Scan_09.22.22-1.pdf

Marshal, J. (2022). Seeking solutions to strengthen career pathways. *Diverse Health*. https://www.diverseeducation.com/from-the-magazine/article/15301817/seeking-solutions-to-strengthen-career-pathways

NASPA (2023). Current state of college and Student Mental Health. *National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE)*. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/resources/current-state-college-and-student-mental-health

Nigro, N. (2007) *The everything coaching and mentoring book*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Parsloe, E., & Leedham, L. (2009). *Coaching and mentoring*. Philadelphia, PA: Kogan Page.

Reed, M. (2023). Career services. *Inside Higher Education*. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/career-services?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed

Ruhalter, K., & Rath, A. (2022). *Mass. can do more to help college students facing food insecurity, advocates say*. GBH News. https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2022/12/01/mass-can-do-more-to-help-college-students-facing-food-insecurity-advocates-say

Saluri, D., Noel, L. & Levitz, R. (1986). *Increasing student retention: Effective programs and practices for reducing the dropout rate*. San Francisco: Jossy-Bass.

Sedlack, W. (2023). Proven strategies help some college students, not all. We have to fix that. *Today's Students/Tomorrows Talent*. https://medium.com/todays-students-tomorrow-s-talent/proven-strategies-help-some-college-students-but-not-all-we-have-to-fix-that-ec652db6bbf6

Vasques, A. (2022). The community college student exodus. *Ed Source*. https://edsource.org/podcast/the-community-college-student-exodus