Bridging the Great Divide: Creating a Comprehensive Academic Support Model in the Classroom

Since the founding of the first American community college in 1901, community colleges have served the important purpose of bridging the gap between the academic skills students bring to the table and the academic rigor required to be successful in a college setting. Tutoring and other forms of academic support provide students with the ability to view materials covered in class from a different perspective. This approach is often used to build a firm academic knowledge base.

Although research indicates a positive correlation between academic support and learning, many students are unable to take advantage of academic support services due to outside obligations such as family care or work, because they are unaware that such support services exist, or because they're afraid of being deemed inferior for needing extra help. Due to these obstacles, it's imperative that educators tailor their curriculum to the needs of their students.

Assessments

The first step in creating an effective academic support model in the classroom is providing students with a variety of assessments to gauge how they learn best and which components of the class they are most passionate about. When students feel their opinions matter, they become more invested and excited about the course, which often results in increased grit and overall effort. Although gauging how students learn best may at first seem impossible or overwhelming, many pre-made assessments can easily and efficiently be added to the course curriculum. Assessments can also be used throughout the semester to measure the effectiveness of instruction so tweaks can be made as needed to increase student learning.

Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator
The Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI) was first developed by Katherine Cook-Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers in the early 1940s. The MBTI was inspired by the work of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Jung believed that personality and motivation were impacted by the ways people viewed, interpreted, and interacted with the world around them – in other words, their personality.

Although Carl Jung originally developed 12 "archetypes," or personality profiles, the MBTI now includes 16 distinct personality types. Overall, this theory contains four dichotomies, each falling along a continuum: Extravert (individuals who initiate tasks and process information by interacting and working with others) or Introvert (individuals who communicate best through writing and processing information internally); Sensing (individuals who value practical, realistic applications and are step-by-step oriented) or Intuitive (individuals who seek to understand the bigger picture and are most likely to seek patterns and relationships between concepts and/or theories); Thinking (individuals who like clearly defined objectives and are logic-oriented) or Feeling (individuals who are compassionate and value a more sympathetic approach); and Judging (individuals who value organization, are methodical in their thinking, and like closure) or Perceiving (individuals who value spontaneity, are often resourceful, and thrive when breaking larger tasks down into smaller, more obtainable tasks). Once completed, the MBTI provides users with a four-letter description of their personality type.

Since someone's personality and temperament can often impact learning, providing this type of assessment to students not only helps them develop study and learning strategies, but it also helps individuals who may not yet know their concentration or major figure out what they want to do with their life. Although this assessment is rather complex, there are many free, reliable, and valid online versions of this assessment.

One way for this assessment to be easily implemented into the curriculum is to have students provide (1) a screenshot of their completed assessment, along with a brief reflection statement regarding what they found most surprising about the assessment; (2) whether they believe the results were an accurate description of their personality; (3) and how they can incorporate the knowledge they have gained to enhance their learning.

Student Surveys
One of the easiest ways to determine students' needs, including learning styles, motivators, and obstacles, is to ask them. Although students may not feel comfortable discussing their individual needs in class, they may be more responsive in a paper assignment or online surveys. To prevent student burnout, try to keep questions to a maximum of ten. Examples of questions might include: "What is your major?"; "How do you learn best?"; "What concerns do you have regarding this course?"; "What concepts/topics are you looking forward to learning more about?"; and "Is there any additional information you would like to share?" Although creating surveys takes planning at the forefront, the information gleaned from such assessments can be extremely insightful.

One of the easiest ways to administer classroom-based surveys is by creating a Google Form or other mode of online survey distribution. Once created, educators can send a special link to students to complete the survey. As students respond, educators can view student response results through graphs and other visual illustrations. No matter which survey mode is chosen, the earlier the survey is given, the more effective and useful the results will be.

Classroom Activities

Although surveys are an important means of determining student and instructional needs, they require motivation and honesty on the students' part for quantitative and qualitative data to be reliable, valid, and meaningful. To account for this, activities are a simple and elegant way for students to learn more about which study and time-management techniques work best for them. Activities also provide students with the option to familiarize themselves with campus support services they may not be aware of.

Paper Airplane Activity

The Paper Airplane Activity begins with each student taking out three pieces of paper. For the first sheet of paper, the instructor explains aloud how to make a paper airplane. For the second sheet of paper, the instructor provides visual instructions (such as an image) that depict how to make the airplane. For the third sheet of paper, the instructor actively demonstrates how to make the airplane. The first sheet of paper represents auditory learning, the second sheet of paper represents visual learning, and the third sheet of paper represents kinesthetic/hands-on learning. After students have completed the activity, the instructor asks students which instructional technique worked best and how they can use this information to improve their course performance.

The benefits of the Paper Airplane Activity include short administration time (approximately 20 minutes), the ability to perform the activity in-person or online, and the opportunity for students to learn which learning styles work best for them.

Guest Speakers

Many students may be unaware of the student support services available on their campus. Typically, campuses offer one-on-one and online tutoring, supplemental instruction, and student organized study nights. These services are often not advertised well, resulting in students not taking full advantage of them. One way instructors can increase student knowledge and use of available support services is by inviting student and academic support specialists to give classroom presentations regarding the services they offer. Normalizing the use of student support services helps students see that using them is not sign of weakness, but an indication of their perseverance and resiliency.

Creating a Caring and Supportive Environment

Making students aware of services and providing them with opportunities to learn more about themselves are two of the greatest gifts an instructor can provide; however, it neglects one major factor that can make or break the collegiate experience. Many students arrive on campus never hearing that they matter or that they can achieve their goals. This often results in feelings of low self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence. To improve their students' perceptions in these areas, educators must provide a caring and nurturing environment in which students can flourish and succeed. Making yourself available, allowing students to learn from and interact with one another, and providing encouragement can make all the difference. When students feel supported, cared for, and worthwhile, they begin to believe in themselves and develop a positive mindset.

Each student arrives on campus with a variety of experiences, skills, and challenges. As such, educators must tailor their instructional strategies to meet students where they are. Although assessments, activities, and encouragement make a huge impact on student performance, the most effective instructors use a variety of activities and techniques to provide a holistic experience that fosters student success.

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