

Student Support Programming and Coursework

Jessica Baron, Academic Advisor, Theatre, Dance, & English, College of Arts & Sciences

Students of the future will come to CU with more diverse educational preparation and academic backgrounds. As an advisor in the College of Arts & Sciences, I believe the University of Colorado Boulder needs to shift in order to support these students and retain them. “Sink or swim” is no longer the mentality in higher education scholarship, because higher education scholars and administrators recognize the preparatory inequities with which students come to college, factoring in first-generation status, socio-economics, and urban and rural high school diminished resources often linked to race and ethnicity. However, “sink or swim” seems to be the mentality of some of our faculty and in some of our programming. If the university admits these diverse, promising students, and it should, we need to do more to support and retain them. CU has tutoring, academic support workshops, and help labs, but nothing is unified, and these resources are dependent on department. There is no campus-wide solution for students who are struggling. The Student Academic Success Center offers workshops on time management and study skills. If students are living on campus or in their first year, they have access to the Academic Success and Achievement Program through Housing and Dining. The Writing Center assists students with writing papers for classes. Students in Engineering have access to the Bold Center with drop-in tutoring. Students in various departments (Physics, Math, Economics) have access to drop-in help labs. There is academic coaching going on in various colleges and programs (McNeill, Arts & Sciences, Engineering). The Bounceback Program exists for those on probation or alert. However, the vision regarding support is not campus-wide. These programs are also often staffed by untrained graduate or undergraduate students. Students report that with some of these resources, such as the various help labs, they didn’t get much help. It is also challenging for students to navigate the many support resources available and get the help they need. Often, they turn to private tutoring for a fee because they cannot access or navigate the available free resources, giving a distinct advantage to those students who can afford private tutoring.

In addition to the lack of a unified approach to academic support, we offer no developmental coursework to help students toward their goals. If we continue to admit students who struggle in college level courses, we should offer preparatory courses to help them become college students once they get here. Preparatory courses for pre-calculus and for college writing for elective credit will help students work toward the degrees they desire. Developmental courses examining career and major exploration, study/college readiness skills, and generating e-portfolios that make personal connections between courses and the concepts of higher education at-large are needed for these underprepared students to assist with motivation, college readiness, and work ethic.

Since I came to CU more than four years ago, I have been lamenting the lack of support for struggling students, through coursework, tutoring, and workshops. My previous institution understood that students coming from high schools in various parts of the state were more or less prepared based on their educational background, not based on their innate ability, and provided a robust supplemental instruction program. Supplemental instruction programming, where high achieving juniors and seniors take the course again and teach students for several more hours each week outside of class, needs to be instituted campus-wide, not just in some pockets.

The faculty in some departments at CU seem to treat many lower division survey courses as “weed-out” classes as opposed to preparatory classes for more in-depth study, expecting and even planning for a certain number of students to fail. This mentality from faculty must be shifted if we are to retain the students of the future. The “weed-out” course is a course of the past. Introductory and preparatory courses that help students grow and learn are the courses of the future. And developmental coursework that helps students to explore why they came to college, who they are as students and how to be successful, and how they intend to use the learning they are doing here in the future needs to be available for credit.