

Addressing the Growing Needs of First-Year Students

N.B. This white paper is in response to a request from Emily CoBabe-Ammann in recognition of the increasing number of underprepared incoming students.

Introduction

An increasing number of students accepted to the University of Colorado lack skills that are critical for success in college-level work. This problem is nationwide, and is not unique to CU (Butrymowicz, 2017). Many of these students have poor academic preparation, and they may not have learned effective study habits. They may suffer from psychological or learning disabilities. They may be emotionally or socially unprepared to live on their own, away from their families and friends. The population of unprepared students will likely expand over the next ten years. CU can best address the growing needs of its first-year students via its first-year programs. Of the different first-year models (e.g. First-Year Seminar (FYS), and Focus Interest Groups (FIGs), and the Residential Academic Programs (RAPs), only the Residential Academic Programs have a strong proven track record of success. They are the oldest of the first-year programs - the first one was the Sewall RAP, established by student initiative in 1970 – and have a long, established history of achievement with incoming students. The RAPs' success stems from being residential programs that are able to establish and build a strong sense of community through their students' first year in college. Neither FIGs nor FYS have a similar living-learning model, and they are not as well situated as the RAPs to develop a sense of belonging. In fact, a version of FIGs implemented over 20 years ago at CU Boulder was discontinued in relatively short order due to ineffectiveness in helping first-year students adjust to college.

RAPs successfully ease the transition between high school and college for many students. They are exquisitely positioned to help struggling students adapt to the rigors of college and enable students to graduate from the university. To be clear, RAPs provide extensive services for high-achieving students as well, including supervising UROP projects, facilitating internships and research opportunities, writing recommendations for medical school and graduate school, supervising Honors Theses for former RAP students – far more than simply offering small classes in a small

residential college environment. This particular white paper will focus on some successful services provided to struggling students in RAPs at CU.

Issues surrounding unprepared students

Students who come unprepared to college present distinct problems. Some have academic deficiencies and require remedial coursework (Butrymowicz, 2017). A majority of colleges and universities admit students with serious academic deficits, and universities offer remedial classes in English and math to prepare them for more rigorous college-level courses. Rates of undergraduates enrolling in remedial classes can be as high as 59% (Butrymowicz, 2017).

An increasing number of students enter college with conditions such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, learning disabilities (LD), and other “hidden” disabilities (Pryor et al., 2010). In a 2010 report by the Higher Education Research Institute, 5% of incoming students reported having ADHD, 3.8% reported having depression or another psychological condition, and 2.9% reported a learning disability such as dyslexia (Pryor et al., 2010). Students with these disabilities are more likely to drink alcohol, require tutoring, and take longer to graduate than students without these conditions (Pryor et al., 2010)

The significant differences between high school and college create other problems (Appleby, 2016). For example, incoming students are often unaware of the increased academic rigor and the expectations of college. Instead, they expect college to be a continuation of high school, equivalent to grade 13. Some are unable or may be unwilling to learn new strategies and behaviors that will allow them to succeed in their new environment.

Incoming students sometimes have difficulty taking responsibility for their own education. Some students are less independent, less resourceful, and more naïve than freshmen from a decade ago or from students in their second, third or fourth year at CU. First-year students often do not actively seek out their professors, teaching assistants, learning assistants, lab instructors, or tutors if they need help. They may require frequent reminders of exams, project dates, and homework. They expect to complete

work during class rather than outside of class. First-year students may be unable to resolve social and academic problems on their own; the problems may be ignored for so long that they develop into complex obstacles to success.

High schools place tremendous emphasis on grade point average, and they use 5-point-scale grades for AP and IB classes that inflate GPAs. In many cases, the focus on grades is made at the expense of *understanding* the material being discussed. Additionally, the inflated high school grade scale creates unrealistic expectations for grading in college classes.

AP and IB students may have the impression that they have already “done” college-level work. If they used the same textbook for their high-school class as the one being used in their college class, the idea that they have completed the course may be reinforced. These students may start with the perception that it is not necessary to put forth much effort to succeed in their college class.

International students face additional and unique challenges. These students may be prepared academically, but may have language or cultural differences that must be addressed. Many international students are admitted despite the fact that their English-language skills are not adequate for success in CU classes. They may not seek available assistance, such as intensive tutoring. Foreign students may come from cultures and backgrounds that are vastly different from those of students who grew up in the United States. Oftentimes, they need extra help in assimilating to living in a new country, in addition to adapting to campus or residence hall life. These academic and cultural hurdles can also be faced by first-generation students and lower-income students.

Among the growing number of students who are unprepared for college is a commensurately growing number of future K-12 teachers. If these future teachers are inadequately prepared for college, and their college education suffers as a consequence, then they will be inadequately prepared to teach. This will perpetuate the production of K-12 students who will be unprepared for college, and the cycle will continue indefinitely.

Possible solutions

Addressing the needs of unprepared student students will require a broad and diverse approach. One way to support students with academic deficits is to offer remedial classes. Studies have shown that unprepared students who take these courses are more likely to stay in college compared to their peers who did not take the courses (Bettinger and Long, 2009). However, developmental classes do not confer college credit, are financially costly to both the university and students alike, and they only address one problem facing unprepared students.

A proven, comprehensive way to address the myriad needs of the first-year student is through Residential Academic Programs (RAPs). CU's RAPs are academic programs within residence halls that foster intensive interactions between first-year students and faculty mentors. RAPs provide an excellent service to incoming students and to the University. RAP students out perform their non-RAP peers (CU Office of Institutional Research, 2014). RAP student retention rates are higher than those of non-RAP students (CU Office of Institutional Research, 2014). Due to small class sizes, RAP instructors are brilliantly positioned to identify struggling students very early in their first semester and direct them to a wealth of campus resources that can help get them on the right track.

First-year students are unique among undergraduates in that most have never lived away from home. Many need advice and encouragement from adults. RAP faculty offer extra support, or serve as a bridge to expert resources, to students who are physically sick, or are struggling with depression, test anxiety, family illnesses or deaths, or are questioning their presence at the university. RAP faculty establish strong relationships with their first-year students and help develop their students' interests. They are present in the residence halls where students live. They see students in the hallways, the classrooms, or their offices, and they interact with them constantly. RAP faculty and staff organize co-curricular activities to build rapport within the RAPs. RAP faculty, staff, and directors not only work among themselves to help students, but they collaborate with housing staff regularly to more easily identify and help students who are having emotional or academic difficulties. Trusting relationships between RAP faculty,

administration, and students are possible because of the extensive, daily interactions. By building community, RAPs provide a sense of belonging to students, and this strong feeling of belonging is critical to students deciding to stay at CU. The high retention of RAP students at CU reported in the 2014 CU Boulder Social Climate Survey is consistent with a strong sense of community experienced by these students. Many students maintain these relationships with RAP faculty for their entire college experience.

Students with academic deficits are likely to be most helped by being in a small group setting. The RAPs work with students in small-sized classrooms, and they establish an active living-learning environment in the residence hall in which the students live. Working intimately with students and engaging them in activities both inside and outside the classroom help promote increased connections among students and faculty. It is these strong connections that are among the most important practices to effective undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson 1987).

Because of small class sizes in the RAPs, and because of the strong commitment of RAP faculty to teaching in general and to pedagogical best practices in particular, the RAPs are especially well-suited to preparing our future teachers. Many RAP classes and instructors incorporate proven strategies like active, inquiry-based, and collaborative learning. These strategies not only give our future teachers better academic preparation to teach their subjects, but they also provide these future teachers with concrete models of better teaching. The RAPs thus provide an unexpected “pay-it-forward” benefit to future generations of learners.

Conclusion

The University of Colorado of the future aims to keep rigorous academic standards while preparing students to succeed at those high standards. This goal means investing more in programs that have been proven successful such as Residential Academic Programs. It also means supporting the teaching faculty that are at the heart of those programs. Teaching faculty and the RAPs provide the infrastructure that supports first-year students and their diverse and unique needs. Teaching faculty and the RAPs have been shown to increase retention of all first-year students. They help ease the

transition from high school to college. They help students with academic deficits succeed in their introductory-level courses. They help international students via language training and better integration with campus and residential life. In short, they make our graduates more competitive and desirable. They are an investment in human capital that provides significant returns to the University.

References

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