



*a podcast about  
how we learn,  
how we teach,  
and how they overlap*

### **Episode 33: Helping Students Become Aware of On-Campus Academic Services**

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 33 - Helping Students Become Aware of On-Campus Academic Services.

Adam: Now, most universities have academic services available to their students: tutoring, mentoring, writing help, supplemental instruction, study skills, training and academic coaching - and those are just a few possibilities. But many students never hear about these services, and so they never use them. So in this episode, the first of our three-part Academic Services series, Dinur and I are going to talk about how teachers can help students become aware of, and use, these services.

Dinur: So the first thing that Adam and I want to do is actually define what these services are. Now, Adam mentioned tutoring, and this is very common. It's probably the best known academic service among students. And that is when you get help with specific subjects. Maybe it's a certain math class, or chemistry, or an art class. It's someone who's gone through that course, and has expertise in it, and they're helping you understand the material and help with the assignments.

Now, note that I said "help." I didn't say "do the assignment for you." It's not their job, because it's not their grade, but they are there to help you understand the material and to work through it.

The second form of help that we talked about is writing help, and this is something that comes into play even if you're not an English student or an English major. This is help with writing all sorts of papers, looking at organization; looking at grammar, spelling. Are your papers cited properly? Because some professors really emphasize that. And so, this is a way where someone can look at your paper and say, "Okay, I think you've got some ideas here, but you've got to develop this more," or, "You've got an idea on page four that really follows better your idea on page one, so why not move it up?"

And the idea is to help your paper flow better and read better. Because ultimately that's part of the thing that you will be graded on.

Adam: Now, supplemental instruction is usually part of a class. You are assigned to go to SI in addition to going to class. And according to Texas State, it's "a nontraditional form of tutoring that focuses on collaboration, group study and interaction for assisting students in undertaking traditionally difficult courses." So we'll put Texas State's link to this, saying what it is, but they will focus, at least at Texas State, on classes that generally have a 30% or higher failure rate without this kind of help. So these are the really in-depth courses. So this might be an advanced chemistry class, or an advanced physics class, or even an advanced poly sci class, or something that's getting on toward graduate level of work, but it's not there yet. This is for upper-division stuff. Mostly, you won't be getting supplemental instruction in, say, a sociology 100 class or an introduction to American history class. This will be something for the very difficult courses that have high failure rates.

And academic coaching - I'm an academic coach, in addition to working full time as a professor. And academic coaching happens both on and off campus. But when campus campuses provide it - for example, at Memphis, the University of Memphis provides an amazing academic coaching program - and academic coaching includes all the other stuff: how to study, how to take a test and do it well, how to manage your stress, how to take good notes that work as study tools, how to manage your time, and handling life issues - even if they're not specifically school issues.

You know, you may come to your academic coach one day and say, "I am having so much trouble with this problem that someone in my dorm is causing me, and I don't know how to handle that." And so we discuss, how do you handle problems like that?

As an undergraduate, now, I did not use these services much, partly because I was never made aware that they existed, but Dinur did. And so he'll be talking some about his experience as a student. And both of us will now talk about our experiences with referring students to these services and helping them understand that it doesn't mean they're dumb. It just means that they need help.

Two other things that I wanted to say before we go into this, though. Tutoring is often the gut subjects. Math, chemistry. I had a student tell me that they had a sociology tutor, but that's not usually the case. It turned out that she thought her writing helper was a sociology tutor, and we kind of had to straighten that out and say, "No, no, you're not getting sociology tutoring here. This is how to write a paper, not the same thing." And then the writing help, be aware that your writing helper is - their job is to make sure that you are writing well in English, that you're following the rules of English.

But if your professor is expecting, say, a research paper and you bring what looks like an essay, and if you don't tell the writing people, "this is what my professor is expecting, is a research paper," they won't know that you need help turning that essay into a research paper. So it's always a good idea with both tutoring and writing help to bring, say, an - you know, an assignment sheet that tells you this is what your assignment is, show it to them and then they can develop a strategy from there. Because if they're flying blind, they're probably going to assume that any writing assignment is an essay, and that won't help you if what you need to write is, say, an annotated bibliography.

Dinur: So, Adam mentioned that I used to use tutoring when I was in undergrad and I definitely remember using it for my college math class, my intro to microeconomics class, and an intro to psych class, because those were three classes where it took a long time for the material to really click for me. And I remember, especially with my psych class, just having an absolutely awful time on the first exam and I figured, "okay, if I don't want to bomb this class, let's see what help I can get."

And I don't remember because it was a while back, I don't remember, uh, whether it was listed in the syllabus or not, because again, it's been years, but I remember talking to my TA at the time, and they were able to point me in the general direction and said, "Hey, this person is able to help you because they took this class. They're a graduate student who taking psychology," and I mean, if you're, if you're in graduate school for it, you've passed the intro class for it at the undergrad level.

And so they helped me make sense of the material. Same thing with my economics course and even the math course where the material - some of it clicked really well; some of it didn't click at all - and I wanted that extra step of getting help to break it down.

And when it comes to writing help, I not only used that as an undergrad, I used that as a graduate student. I took my, both my master's thesis and chapters of my dissertation, to the on-campus Writing Center. I would make appointments with them and have them look over parts that I had written. Even if they weren't experts in the field, and they might not know the theory or the content as well, they can certainly tell me if they think I've developed ideas pretty fully, they can let me know the organization of a chapter works.

The writing center is useful because you're getting a fresh set of eyes on your work because often we are blind to where our writing is weak. Because we read our own work the way we intended to be read, but someone who is not us doesn't necessarily know what we were trying to convey unless we're really, really clear.

And so having that extra set of eyes, having someone say, "Hey, this idea really needs to be fleshed out a little bit more," or "Hey, these ideas are more connected than you think they are." That goes a really long way towards making the actual paper give a little bit better with what's in our mind.

Adam: And I will say that I wish that I'd used writing services for both my master's thesis and my dissertation, because, as I now tell my students, I had two favorite thumbprint words. And if you took my 220-page dissertation and boiled it for those two words, you'd probably get about 20 pages of nothing but "however" and "obviously."

I loved those words, I loved them. So - and if I had had somebody pre-read my dissertation, they probably would've said, "Do you know how many times you've said 'obviously' in the last five pages?" and I would have removed some of them, but I didn't.

So, clarity in writing also is catching those things that are sort of your written fingerprints; that phrase that you just love to use, so you use it all the time. One of the ones that I'm currently seeing a lot from my students is "in light of the fact that." Okay, you could just say "because," you know, and it wouldn't be as wordy. Uh, and I'm really, really sensitive to wordy writing.

And, so, a lot of your writing helpers will also be able to say, "Do you know how much you've buried the idea? I mean I'm not in your discipline and because you buried it in all these words, I can't figure out what you're saying, man, you've got to fix this." So that's also helpful with writing help.

Dinur: For me, I see a lot of students writing "however," even when there was no contrast, and they continue, and I go, "what's the however, what's the twist? What am I looking for?" But it sounds good. And so people write it in, not thinking that that really changes the meaning of the sentence.

Adam: The writing help can also help you catch things like - I had a student once who thought that "whom" was the formal way to say who and so "whom does this" and "whom does that" was very common in their

papers and I sent them to the writing center. And they came back so upset. They're like, "they told me, whom is - what is whom, then?"

And I'm like, "Who is he; whom is him. That's how you replace it. It's just, it's just a pronoun."

And she said, "well, I liked the way I write it."

And I said, "right, but the way you write it isn't right."

And after discussion with her and the writing center helper, she finally gave in and said, "all right, I don't like it but I'll learn it."

And I've had a lot of students who just have overly wordy writing. They use 10 words where they only need four. And so writing help helps you catch all of those problems. If you have a love affair with the comma, the writing center will point out, you know, "you've got a run-on sentence that's like a page and a half long, and you haven't put any periods in here. This needs to be broken up." So in addition to developing ideas, like Dinur was talking about, they'll also catch the technical, practical, mechanical problems of writing, like run-on sentences, and comma splices, and "how many semi-colons can we fit in one paragraph?" and, you know, weird capitalization errors, and all kinds of things that, for a lot of students coming out of high school and into college - or even if you've been in college a few years - these may not be intuitive to you.

But the writing center helpers, they're going to really have an intuitive sense of the stuff you've got to catch every time, because it makes you look like you don't know what you're doing.

Dinur: Right, or the a one-and-a-half to two-page paragraph.

Adam: Ah, yes. I tell my students, if you're still reading the same sentence and you get to the second page and you're turning blue in the face, you might want to check to see if you have a run-on.

And so writing center help. One of the good things about both tutoring and writing center help is that it's often a peer. It is not someone who is elevated above you in the academic hierarchy. It's someone who might be, maybe, a senior when you're a second year, but they're not going to lord it over you. They're not going to make you feel like you're two inches tall. And there's not the intimidation factor of, say, your professor. So that's really helpful when you go to tutoring and writing help.

And then let's talk about supplemental instruction and academic coaching for a minute. So, supplemental instruction, I heard about this first when I was redesigning a course and they started hammering on it and saying, you know, if you need supplemental instruction, you hire a graduate student and they host, basically, it's hosting a study group, where you are digging into really difficult topics, really difficult ideas that are hard to grasp, hard to learn, take some time, take some going over them a few times.

And as Texas State defined it, "collaboration, group study and interaction." So it is not you sitting alone with a tutor. It is someone who is helping you and six other people in your class go through this really, really difficult equation that your physics professor expects you to know when you take the next exam.

Dinur: So you might think of it almost as a small seminar where you're developing that skill.

Adam: And the way that Texas State puts it is, once a week you have a 50 minute supplemental instruction, and you might think of it as a lab that's run by a teaching assistant. It's the same, same idea.

And then academic coaching is where you learn how to study, where you learn test making skills, and test management, and stress management; where you learn how to take good notes. So many students don't know how to take good notes and so if you go to an academic coach, they can often say, "okay, look, when you're taking notes, here's what you put in, here's what you leave out."

A lot of our earlier episodes were based on coaching materials that I have used with my students that I created myself. And so, like, if you go back to our Time Management series, that's all academic coaching. That's the kind of thing an academic coach would do for you.

So all of these are really important academic services and a lot of professors don't really realize A, that their students might need them and B, that their students might not know they exist. So we'd like to talk now about how professors can use this information, and make it more clear and more accessible to students who need these academic services.

Dinur: And one way to do it, as basic as it sounds, is announce the services in class - through email, posting it on a campus board, making announcements in your lectures, just making students aware of it in different forms goes a really long way.

Adam: A recent article in the Chronicle talked about career services coming in and talking to students. Well, it's not just career services. You could invite the director of the campus tutoring center to come in and talk to your students about their services. I often have a librarian come in and talk to students about library services, and once they're aware of it, because someone came in and talked to the class about it, they're more likely to use it.

So, for example, you might set up a day where it's like "student services day," and you maybe let the student services on campus, you reach out to them and say, "Hey, you want to come in and talk to my students for 15 minutes on March 4th?" You know, "We have our class meeting from 10:30 to 11:45, I can give you from like 10:45 to 11 - can you come in and do a 15 minute presentation?" And maybe make that day a day where you let four or five different academic services on campus come in and tell the students about here's what we've got for you. If you're having trouble with this, come see me. Or if you're having trouble with that, go see them.

So that they know that these things are actually there. Hearing someone talk about it, especially if it's someone who's part of it, will often go a long way toward getting students aware of it and more ready to use it.

Dinur: Now, another way that we as teachers are able to make our students aware of these services is by incorporating it into our assignments. So, I've had times where my students have to turn their papers in to the writing center as part of their grade. More often, if they show me a slip that's signed by someone from the writing center indicating what they went over, I offer a grade bump on the paper. You know, a little bit of extra credit, because that shows me that the student cared enough to take that extra time to work on that assignment. And that's something that I'd like to reward.

Adam: And of course supplemental instruction is also part of the class. So that's one way to make sure that students know about that. And that brings us to, put it in the syllabus. Every syllabus is going to have at least one page that says "university information, university policies, university this" - well, you could have "university services" and say "Academic services, go to this building for the tutoring lab. Go to this building for the writing

lab. Go to this building to get your supplemental instruction. The academic coaching center is here, here's how you contact them. There's email addresses, here's web addresses," so that they will be able to find that information without having to wander all over campus wondering "where the heck are you supposed to find it?"

And have it in a few different locations and have it written down in areas that both you and your students have access to. So put it in the syllabus; put it an announcement on the learning management system; if your campus has a text message system, send a text out once or twice a week saying, "hey, have you gone to the writing center to get some help with your paper?" Just make it visible so that the students will be aware of it. Because if it's not visible, of course they're not going to know that they need it.

And so we just want to talk a little bit about how students can use it. This was mainly aimed at teachers, to say "Teachers, make them aware," but if you're a student, once you know about academic services, maybe put an hour in your schedule to visit them once a week. Like "go to writing center on Thursdays from two to three before I go to my English class." Because once you have it scheduled, you're much more likely to go and do it. If you don't put it on the schedule, it's like, "oh, I might visit the writing center" and then you don't, and then you turn in your paper without the slip that would give you an extra bump in say, Dinur's class and that harms you. That's not fair to you. If you just set it up and say, "this is my time to go look at academic service A, B, C, or M," then you'll be more likely to actually go do it.

Dinur: No, if that's the practical challenge, this might be the more personal challenge - and as a student, you have to identify what you struggle with. Do you freak out on tests? Is there material that's just not clicking for you? Is writing something really, really tough? You have to be honest with yourself, and view these services as people who can help you overcome these obstacles, because that is what they are there for. They're not there to make fun of you. They're not there to make you feel bad. They're trying to help your academic work be the best version it could be, but they're not going to be able to help you, unless you go to them.

Adam: And not only that, making fun of you? many of them may have been where you are. That's what motivates a lot of people to become a campus tutor, to become a writing helper. They've also struggled with this. They know where you've been. They've been in your shoes. They're not going to make fun of you.

Now this is a cultural thing. So you talked about the practical and the personal, and now let's talk about the cultural.

Asking for help is normal when you don't know something, you don't have to do everything yourself. And I know a lot of us, a lot of our students are coming from cultures that say, "asking for help is wimpy." "Asking for help is bad." "Asking for help means you're weak."

And as a sociologist, I hate to sound like this, but all of those cultures are wrong. They're wrong. The fact that you were told, since birth, that asking for help is bad, doesn't make it bad. It just means that there are some people who have really unreasonable expectations of what a person could do on their own, in the culture you were raised in - whatever culture that is.

I was raised by two parents who thought that since I was smart, I would never need help and as a result, I failed several classes in high school, and then I failed a few classes the first time I was in college, and then I flunked out of college, because I was terrified to ask for help because I thought if I asked for help, that reduced the meaning of the grades I got it somehow made them less important.

I gotta tell you folks, the idea of the individual doing everything, nobody achieves anything in a vacuum. Even if all you're doing is working on your paper and dropping by your professor's office hours, it's still your paper. All they did was give you feedback. If you go to the writing center, they're just giving you feedback that your love affair with the comma will not fly. It doesn't mean that you're a bad person. It doesn't mean that you're weak. It doesn't mean that you're stupid. It means there's something you didn't know.

And everybody has something they don't know.

Dinur: And remember, Adam and I, in previous episodes, mentioned that we don't judge our students based on their grade. And we certainly don't judge them for needing help. We want our students to put their best foot forward. And the way I look at it is if I expect my students to work hard for me, then I should work hard for them. And part of that help is figuring out where they need help and the resources that they - that are available to them to be able to do so. But I also expect my students to take advantage of these services and to give me their best effort when they turn in an assignment.

Adam: And if we know your professors, most of them are the same way. Will there be a few professors who judge you? Of course. Just like there's going to be a few bosses who judge you, and a few coworkers to judge you.

But in the main, by and large, your professors want you to succeed as much as you do, and we're willing to find ways to help you do that.

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Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 34, when Adam and I discuss how teachers view academic services.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!