



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

Episode 34: Academic Services - How Teachers See Them

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

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 34: Academic Services - How Teachers See Them.

Now, teachers are human - and that means that we have the same number of hours in a day as anyone else does. Generally, our job as teachers is to prepare classes, teach the content to our students, and then evaluate and grade what they turn in. But that's "generally."

Dinur: At many universities, your professors are paid for their research, not their teaching. And that means that research gets rewarded, and teaching might be rewarded by some schools, but they might reward it less than research, or the school just might not care at all. And that means that good teaching doesn't necessarily get rewarded, and bad teaching isn't punished. Bad teachers can remain in the professorial pool, as long as they're publishing articles and books, and bringing in grant money. That doesn't excuse bad teaching, but it does give us a little insight into why some teachers don't invest energy and time into their teaching.

Adam: And the other thing is that in the real world, especially these days, a lot of students who come into the college classroom do not have the kind of preparation that college professors expect them to have. Now, this is partly because professors don't realize just how much high school has changed since they were in school, but it's also partly due to the increase in how many people are coming to college, because now a bachelor's degree is required, where a high school diploma used to be enough.

So professors assume that students coming in have had college-prep training, that they have learned how to critically think, that they have learned how to manage their time, that they've learned to take a big project and break it down into small pieces. Why? Because 30 or 40 years ago, when they were in high school, they were taught those things!

And it really hasn't percolated down for a lot of the professoriate that the way students are prepared in high school now is nothing like the preparation that they had. It's very, very different.

And the other thing is, that since they don't realize, as teachers, that these kids didn't get that kind of background and those kinds of skill sets and, basically, that kind of training, they just assume that they'll learn as they go.

This is also a problem because of the differences in what professors are compensated for. Teaching is not something professors get really all that compensated for as Dinur was just saying. And so having to teach the students those skill sets, which, from the professor's point of view, they should already have - that really creates problems in learning. Because the student doesn't have a skill set that the professor's course demands. And the professor cannot take class time to teach that skill set. The students have got to get it somewhere, but where are they going to get it?

Dinur: And this is where academic services and disability services on campus come in. These services help you with things like writing problems, study skills, maybe they offer tutoring in things like math or science, and they also help with people who have disabilities, whether we're talking about visible disabilities or invisible ones. But you might be wondering: how do professors view these services?

Adam: So first, I'd say we see them as a resource. It's both for the students, but it's also for us. We don't have the time to cover or address all the issues that a student is facing when it comes to lacking a needed skill set. And we certainly don't have the ability to fix their disabilities. So using these services is going to make our job easier as well as the student's job.

For example, if a student comes to me and they say, "I have no idea what you're talking about when you say you need to break down a big project," ideally, I can send them to the study skills center on campus and they will teach them how to break down the big project. Or if a student has an invisible disability like ADHD, they need to go to the disability services center and bring some paperwork back so that I know, "okay, this student is going to get double time on tests because they have a diagnosed disability." And as we already talked about in a previous episode, they don't tell us what your disability is. They just tell us that you have one and the accommodations you're entitled to under the law.

Dinur: Now, Adam mentioned that we see them as a resource, and that's absolutely true. As teachers, we think better of students who use these services, because to us that shows a student cares enough to take time from their day, or make time in their day, in order to get extra help on their assignments. And to me, and to Adam as well, that shows us dedication to improvement. And that shows us that our class means something to you, because you're adding that extra effort and getting help. You want to make your project that little bit better. You want to do better on our tests. That's really flattering.

Adam: And now, that may surprise some of you. And I know this, because I've had students coming in from high school, or even from community college, who truly believe that if they don't get an A, the professor thinks they're stupid. Or if they don't do perfectly on a paper, then the professor thinks that they're an idiot. Lots of nasty judgements. Okay? Very fixed-mindset judgments.

So a lot of students, they think, you know, they think "my professor is going to judge me if I don't get an A on everything."

So it's not surprising that a lot of students also think that we, the professors, are going to think less of you if you go use the writing center, or if you go get the help of a tutor, and that could not be further from the truth. We want you to learn, and we only have 24 hours in a day. We only have five days in a week. We don't have the time to provide all the learning that you need. We don't have the time to say, "all right, this is exactly how

you break down a paper,” but that's what academic services are for. That's what they do and they do it really well, so we want you to use those services. We're not going to judge you for using those services. I promise you.

Dinur: And also remember that we deal with many, many students, and that's also part of why we can't individually teach students how to do things like breaking down a project, outside of maybe coming into office hours. But academic services has a lot more people working in it than just one person, just your professor, and that means that they're going to have a staff of people - both undergraduates for tutoring, as well as professionals who are able to spend time and spend energy. That's their job and they're going to help you.

Adam: And also, the academic student centers, they're up on the latest research about how learning works, what skills are needed, what skills work, how to teach those skills. Your professors don't have that information, unless that is their specialization in research. They're not going to know all the nitty-gritty ins and outs of “this is why doing it this way actually makes learning work better,” or “this is why doing it that way makes it easier to build a paper from the bottom up.”

But your academic services center, they're going to have that research. They're going to have that information. They're going to be up-to-date on the very latest stuff that you need to know, and that they need to know, in order to help you get your assignments done.

So the thing is, even then, a lot of students are kind of hesitant - and we'll talk about this in our next episode; in episode 35 we're going to talk about students who are still like, “yeah, but it feels like I'm cheating” or “it doesn't feel right” or “I don't like the idea of having to ask for help” or “it makes me feel weak if I use these services.”

We promise; we will get to that. Check back in next week for episode 35 for that.

Dinur: But the way students can use the advice and the information that Adam and I have been talking about in this episode is, well, one: make time to use these services. Go to tutoring, go to the writing center on campus for help with your papers. Ideally, make a regular appointment. You know, “Mondays I'm going to get help with on math from 11 to 1215; Wednesdays I'm going to get help with science or with my writing.”

That's the ideal. But if you can't do that, and maybe it's an extra strain on your time, that you just cannot deal with? Go to the writing center; go get help with tutoring when you have a big project or when you have a test coming up.

Adam: And be aware of what services the centers on your campus offer, because maybe a tutor can only meet you for a certain number of hours per semester. Or they can only meet at specific days or times. So you've got to consider that when you put these things in your planner. Call first, or go on the website and make an appointment. If you know that the writing center is going to take a couple of days to send back your paper with a comment, then build that into your planning. Don't say “I'm going to take this to the writing center” the day before it's due. Take it to the writing center a week before it's due, so you have time to get feedback, make the revisions and then turn it in.

Dinur: Now if we're talking about disability services: if you have a diagnosis in hand, go to disability services early in the semester to make arrangements for your learning and your testing accommodations. Because, as professors, we need that paperwork to be able to offer things like extra time or testing in a separate area - and usually that's disability, the disability services office with a proctor there, to make sure that you're taking the test

fairly, meaning if it's closed notes, you're not able to use your notes, but you are tested separately and it's supposed to be a much quieter testing area than in a classroom sometimes.

Adam: And if you don't have a diagnosis? When you get to campus, as in "in the first week or two," some disability centers on campus are able to assess, even though they can't diagnose specific learning disabilities. For example, I have learning disabilities. I'm autistic, but a lot of the problems of my autism present as learning disabilities. And when I was in community college, when I first went back to school, I was having enormous trouble.

And I went to the, um, I went to the disability services center on the advice of a friend and I said, "can you help me?" And they ran me through some psychological tests and some neuropsych tests and said, "okay, we've identified you've got problems with short term memory and you've got problems with this and this and that entitles you to these accommodations."

So even though they couldn't diagnose me, they could assess what my issues were, and then send out a letter to the professors saying, "Hey, you got to give this guy a quiet room and double time on tests. He'll have to make his appointments with our center and take his tests here."

And that's fine. You know that's usually enough to get accommodations - and don't be ashamed of accommodations. Just like I said in the episode that we recently did about disabilities, it's just like glasses for your brain. Glasses are not cheating. Well, neither is double time on tests if you have ADHD. I promise, that really is the way it is.

Dinur: Now, the way teachers can use this information is one: offer extra credit, whether you're talking about on an assignment, or whether you mean extra credit for the course overall, if students prove that they use academic services during the semester.

But one thing that I like to do is, when students give me something from the writing center that signed and discusses what help they received on a paper, I add three extra credit points, or 3%, to that paper - enough for a grade bump. Because that should hopefully result in, if nothing else, a better organized paper and a cleaner - as far as typos and as far as grammar mistakes go - paper. And that makes it a lot easier and a lot more enjoyable to read, and to evaluate, because those are things that I don't need to think about. I can just really look at the content, see how well you dove into it.

Also, if you're a teacher, make your students aware of the different academic and disability services on your campus. Put their name, put their phone number, put their email in your syllabus and announce it in class early in the semester, because we cannot assume that our students are aware of the services that exist on campus, but it's our job to be aware.

Adam: And in fact, you can even call these services offices and say, "Hey, could you maybe send over some people to present to my class on what you guys have to offer?" Maybe the first week or two class when you're not really digging into course content yet, and just have someone from the learning center come in and talk to the class about "these are the different things that learning center can offer you."

I really wish that we could just establish a day in the first week of class to say, "this is the day that all the people who do services on campus, the learning center, the writing center, the testing center, the disability center, the library, and they're all gonna come in and give, like, a 10 minute presentation to your class on what they offer." Because a lot of times these folks, they will talk at orientation. But orientation is overwhelming and

a lot of students at orientation are going, "it's so big, there's so much going on. What did they just say about - oh, I don't have any idea what they just said. It must not be important;" and maybe it was the most important thing you needed to know like: "you have a disability. Here's where the disability services center is."

Now, the other thing, teachers, when students come to you with a letter from disability services, you must do as it says, regardless of your own feelings. It doesn't matter if you had the struggle through with dyslexia when you were in college because there were no disability services. You do not get to penalize or punish the kids who are currently bringing you a disability services document that says, "this student has the legal right to these accommodations." Must do what the note says, no matter how much you hate it.

So, that's what we've got for you in Episode 34. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd really appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 35, when Adam and I talk about how teachers can help students who need academic services, but view them as a weakness.

Dinur: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Adam: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

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Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!