



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

Episode 35: Academic Services - Helping Students Who See Academic Services as a Weakness

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 35: Academic Services - Helping Students Who See Academic Services as a Weaknesses.

In episode 34, Adam and I talked about why academic services, like tutoring and writing help, are necessary. Professors just don't have the available time in class to cover skills that, well, students are expected to have when you take those courses. And the flip side is that many students weren't taught those skills in high school. Someone has to pick up the slack. And that's where academic services come in. But keep in mind, academic services like tutoring and writing and math help aren't the only services that are available. Academic services include disability services

Adam: But a lot of students are really resistant to the idea of using academic services, because in their head somehow it makes them weak. And this becomes especially obvious when the services that we're talking about are supposed to help with an invisible disability, like dyslexia, or ADHD, or anxiety, or depression. It's also a problem for students who find themselves confronted with an expectation that they know how to prioritize, or manage their time, or break down big projects into small pieces. They've never done those things before, but they're being handed a project in their chemistry class that assumes they already have all of those skills. This is stressful.

Dinur: Yeah. Another issue is that many college students are in their late teens and their early twenties, and this is a period of life when what other people think often matters to us more than anything else. It's very much a continuation of high school in junior high when we care about being popular and being accepted.

Well, if our culture also looks down on people who have disabilities or lack skills, or discourages us from asking for or accepting help, this throws up additional barriers to getting the help that we need. And this poses additional challenges, and it's part of adapting to college life and growing away from high school.

Adam: So, earlier this week, I was reading Quora, which is a question and answer site, and I saw an - a question that amused me terribly, because it was someone who had just started college and they were asking, "Is college going to be like high school, with popular kids being the most important and cliques and things like that? I really didn't have a good time in high school, and I'm really scared that it's going to be a repeat of my high school experience when I get to my college."

Well, one person who answered gave a very thoughtful answer and they said, "It's understandable. You're still at an age where what everybody else thinks is more important than what you decide that you want to do with your life, but in most colleges" - and let us all reassure you right now, both the writer of that response and Dinur and I - college is not like that.

Most colleges are big enough that those cliques either can't form or they only form in certain small areas of a college. Like, the respondent said, "yeah, you're going to see that if you're in the Greek system, you know. If you're in a fraternity and sorority system, that's really where you see sort of a social continuation of the way things were in high school." But if you're going to school and you're just there to get your biology degree, there aren't any pep rallies that you're going to have to sit at, and you don't have to walk by the popular kids on your way to the cafeteria. That that just stops happening.

And for some students that's enough. For some students it's like, "Oh, none of my fellow classmates are going to be judging me. Okay, then I'm going to go and use academic services." In high school, if you needed a tutor, probably everybody knew about it whether you wanted them to or not, and it was an embarrassing and shameful thing, but that's not the way it is in college.

Dinur: And keep in mind, colleges have thousands of students, so odds are some of these thousands of students are making use of the very same services that you're looking at. Because let's be honest, if no one was using them, these services wouldn't be there. The fact that they're there and they're operating - and I promise you, you will see students pretty regularly there - means that there are a lot of people in the same situation as you.

Now, ultimately, your grades and your degree are your goal, and that means that you have to prioritize yourself when it comes to reaching it. Adam and I have discussed the idea of "working disciplined," but part of reaching your goal is making sure that you can reach it and have help along the way.

You getting a college degree does not have to be climbing Mount Kilimanjaro or Mount Everest in shorts on a snowy day. You can have help. And this is where academic and disability services come in. Adam has some examples of how he's handled this situation with students who may have lacked certain academic skill sets or needed help.

Adam: So I'm thinking about three students in particular. Uh, one student basically came in with very few skills. They did not know anything about how to manage their time. They had no idea what it meant to break a big project down into small pieces. They didn't understand how to study. They had a scheduled four hours a day, each day, every day, for each of the two classes that I was in. So eight hours a day of studying for my class, and they weren't getting anywhere. They were having a terrible time.

And there weren't tutors for sociology classes - and generally there won't be, there will be writing tutors, but there won't be sociology tutors. That's not one of the classes that they generally provide, uh, tutoring for - but this student was stressed out, so stressed out, because they came to me in week three, and they're like, "I'm spending eight hours a day on this class and I don't understand what I'm doing."

Well, so it turned out that their “eight hours a day” was probably an hour of actual work in each class, and then just sitting and staring at the book, and freaking out, and stressing out, and thinking, “I’ve got all these things I’ve got to do, but I don’t even know where to start!”

And so I sat them down and I told them, “Okay, you need some help learning how to study. Read this handout that I created” - which I gave them - “and then you need to go over to the campus learning and testing center, and get together with someone who can help you out with following through on these study skills.”

And what they needed, interestingly, was not a subject tutor or a writing tutor. What they really needed was a study skills tutor. And we kind of cobbled that together between me and the learning center.

I also required them to cut back on how much time they were spending on studying, and writing down exactly what they were going to do, which they had never done before. The thought of writing down a to do list was foreign to them, and I said, “no, you’re going to write down, these are the three things I’m going to do in this one and a half hour session of studying. I’m going to do this, then I’m going to do that. And then I’m going to do that. Not just ‘study sociology,’ but ‘write down 20 terms and their definitions and turn them into flash cards.’”

And this student used academic services when they ran into a problem in their math class, but first they had to be convinced that it was okay to use a tutor, that nobody was going to look down their nose at them for using a tutor. And this was an older student, but they were also an older student who was constrained, to some extent, by cultural expectations about what was okay and not okay. Asking for help? Absolutely not okay. Absolutely not. And so for them they had to really get over the hurdle of, “I’m asking for help. That’s shameful.” It’s not shameful.

I had another student who was dealing with a disability but would not get disability accommodations, because they were certain that their parents would get wind of it. And they were from a culture that absolutely does not recognize that disability is a thing. And they had ADHD, and they were suffering, and I said, “You will go over to disability services, and you will get the assessment done, and you will give me the paperwork.”

“But then my mom will find out about it!”

“No, she won’t. That is private. You’re an adult, your mom’s not going to find out about this.”

And then I had one student who I gave a study skills lesson - because that is something that I make a point of doing - and I know that not all professors can do that. But I gave a study skills lesson, and I have them come up to me afterwards and say, “Okay, why weren’t they teaching me this in high school? Why aren’t they teaching this on this campus?”

And I said, “Well they are, ‘cause you got it from me.”

But what I would like to see is a study skills center, not just a tutoring center that tutors you on specific subjects, but an actual study skills center. And more and more, there are campuses that are putting together what they call coaching centers, academic coaching centers, where you learn things like time management and how to study and how to study effectively.

And again, just like we said with academic services, you know, they’re up on the latest, uh, research on how this works: on how studying works, how it doesn’t work, how learning works, how it doesn’t work.

And you've got to get over the shame. And I know that's hard. I know that's really hard. Shame is one of those pernicious things that we can't get rid of, that we always feel. It's that little voice in the back of your head saying, "See, you're not really worth it. You're not really qualified, you're not really good enough."

Would you say that to someone with a broken leg that they're not qualified just because they can't walk right now. Would you say that to someone who's wearing glasses? Would you say that to someone who had never been taught to swing a bat and then wonders why they're not doing well in baseball? If you're not taught how to do it, you can't beat yourself up for not having known how to do it. This is not something that comes by osmosis. It's not something that we're born with. It's not part of our genetic memory. Even your professors had to learn how to study. I guarantee it and some of them still don't know how, and I guarantee that too.

So try not to beat yourself up for needing the help. And this does take kind of a shift, in the same way that moving from a fixed mindset to a learning mindset takes a shift, this is also going to take a shift.

Dinur: So, some time ago, yeah, I was teaching a class and I had mentioned either using academic or disability services, I think disabilities - and a few of my students in the class were interested in becoming police officers and expressed concern saying, "Well, if the Academy finds out, or the police departments find out that I've gone and received disability services or gotten counseling, they're going to kick me out. They're not going to accept me because that's the rules."

So I called the campus disability services and the counseling center, both. And I asked, "Okay, do you ever divulge this information?" And they said "No, unless the student gives permission."

What I told them, and what Adam and I will say here, is that if you don't give permission for the centers to release this information, no one will ever know unless you decide to tell them. Because legally they are bound by confidentiality. They cannot tell anyone why they saw a person the most they can say - and that's only if you allow it - is that you received services or that you were seen on a specific day.

So as your teachers, as your professors, we don't know why you went. We don't know what the diagnosis is, and we are not going to ask because it is not our business. It is your business and the university's.

That said, if you are able to get help, do so, and know that legally your school will not release that information to anyone unless you explicitly allow it.

Adam: Yeah. That was another thing that the second student I talked about, she's like - she was convinced that if she got help for her disabilities, then her mother would know about it. No, she was 21 years old, not mom's business!

And for some of us who have grown up in very insular communities, where everybody knows everybody else's business, it may feel very weird to think about mom not knowing about that. But the fact is, you have a right to say, "Mom? Mom doesn't get to know about this. Dad doesn't get to know about this because all they'll do is shame me."

I have one more student that I wanted to talk about, and I know I've mentioned her before. The student who had trouble with reading that I walked over to the disability services office, and it turned out that she had a severe form of dyslexia, right? Her parents were never told that she used disability services. You know why? Because it's none of their business. And legally the school's not allowed to tell them that. So for those of you

who are worried about this, please set that worry aside. It is not something you will ever have to disclose to anyone unless you choose to.

That gets us into, well, how do you choose not to feel this way? And I'll let Dinur take it from here.

Dinur: Well, the first part is arguably the toughest, because in order to stop feeling like you're weak for accepting help from academic or disability services, it's going to take a mindset shift.

Now, the first part is just think about it pragmatically or practically. Your tuition is paying for the services. That means you've got the right to use them, doesn't it? Why would you pay for something that you can't or don't use?

Adam: And second, think about it in terms of learning the skills you need. You might not have them right now, but using the services means you'll get the skills. And then, once you've got the skills, you probably won't need to keep using the services. So think of it as an intervention. It's going to fix a short term problem that you're facing. Once you've got the skill of breaking down a big project, do you need to go back and keep getting the skill again? No, because now you have it. So just get the skills, put them in your toolbox.

Dinur: Third, think about the results you'll get. Papers that have been proofread are often stronger, not because writing centers know our content. Like Adam said, there aren't sociology tutors generally, but there are writing centers. But the centers help with organization, the flow of your writing, phrasing, grammar - and these are all really small things, but they add up really, really, really quickly.

The people who work in these centers on campus are people whose job it is to make sure that your finished product is better. Remember, as your teachers, we don't see the amount of time, we don't see the nerves you face when you're writing a paper. All we see is what you submit. So why not make that as polished as possible? Way to think about this is, think of the academic and disability services as personal trainers. Instead of helping you train your body, they're helping you train your brain.

Adam: And think about it this way, too. What are you going to be prouder of? A bad paper that you wrote by yourself without any help and without any editing or outside advice, or a better paper that you got help for? If your grade is the goal, why are you avoiding a pathway to a better grade due to pride?

And also just to let you know, most writers - in fact, all writers - it doesn't matter what they're writing for or who they're writing for, they never publish anything. It's their first draft.

Stephen King - I use Stephen King as an example for my students 'cause he's a well known writer. He's published almost 80 books, and usually they are 300 pages to 800 pages in the book. Which means they're more like 2000 pages of manuscript. And I tell them, his process is, he writes a book, and when he's done writing the first draft of his manuscript, he sticks it in a drawer for three months. And then three months later he pulls it out and he edits it and he goes through it and he fixes all the problems that he can see, now that he's let his eyes have a chance to refresh.

And then he prints out the new draft, second draft, and he gives it to his wife Tabitha. And then she edits the heck out of it and gives it back to him and says, "Steve, get rid of this. Get rid of this, get rid of this. This is stupid. Remove this." She usually removes 10% of his paper, or his book. So she'll usually remove 10% of what he's written.

Then he rewrites it again, and then he sends it to his experts, to get their checks on it. And for example, there was one time he talks about it, and I think in his book *On Writing*, he had given the copies of *Salem's Lot*, which was his second book, his first vampire novel, to his experts to people check things that they really knew a lot about, so that he would know that he didn't make any mistakes.

And his gun expert happened to be an English teacher another fellow English teacher at the school where he, where he was also a teacher at the time - he hadn't quit his jobs yet. He was still working while he was writing - and he walked into the teacher's lounge and he saw this fellow, who was an older man who looked kind of like Santa Claus, with the manuscript in front of him. And it was open like a third of the way through, and he was laughing his head off.

And at that time, Stephen King did not really put humor into his horror books, because he hadn't realized yet that if you're writing horror you've got to give the audience something to laugh at, so that they'll be even more stressed out when they read the more scary stuff.

And he's like, "what are you laughing at Dave?" - whatever this guy's name was - and Dave looked up at him and said, "You're very glad that I, that I read this before you, you know, before you published it."

And Stephen King's all, "Why?" and Dave handed him a page out of the manuscript.

And apparently - so Stephen King was writing about the rural people of Maine, which is, you know, most of Maine is fairly rural when you get inland, when you go west in Maine - And he had set his story in a little town in Maine, called Salem's Lot. And he was trying to set the scene, and this chapter was starting with how, in the fall, as the cold begins to set into the hills, you hear the popping of rifles as the locals shoot *peasants* for their winter food.

Not pheasants but *peasants*. No H. And he had repeated the error like, three times.

And this is why you do not turn in your first draft, by the way, kids. So, the fact is he goes through three, four, five drafts before he even sends it to his agent, let alone to an editor.

If he has to do that, that means he got help writing all of his books.

He's successful because he accepted help, not because he rejected help. Think about your favorite athlete. How well would they do if they didn't listen to their coach? Think about your favorite dancer. How well would they do if they didn't listen to their, to their trainer, to the person who was teaching them how to do all of those difficult steps? Think about anybody you like who's professional. I guarantee you they did not get where they were on their own. They had help, they accepted support, they accepted help. They didn't just try to do it all on their own. As Dinur said, they didn't try to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in shorts on a winter day.

Dinur: So how do you handle what you feel about using these services? Maybe you're wondering 'What if someone I know sees me at the writing center?' or "What if someone I know sees me going to disability services, or getting tutoring? What do I do then?"

You just bumped into someone from class? Well, they might also be nervous or embarrassed if you feel nervous or embarrassed. Odds are, someone else has those same fears as you do. But just by being there, you and your peers and your classmates show that you care about the assignments, or about the class, and

you're there to do better. You might not be best friends, but you can at least understand and respect the idea of wanting to do well in the class, and that means that you're not going to be shamed for getting that help.

Adam: Also, if you see your classmates there, that means they're using the services too, right? That means that either they're not ashamed of using them in the first place - and you might ask them how they did that - or they're just as worried that you're judging them as you are, that they're judging you. Maybe you could set up a study group with the other kids who are using the same services as you are. Maybe you could get past the shame by realizing, "Hey, I'm not the only one who needs this help. There are others who need it too."

Dinur: Now remember, too, your classmates are not the ones grading you. Your professors are. So even if you're embarrassed - and really, you're working to improve your paper, your skills, and do better on your tests. So why be embarrassed by that? - your peers, your classmates have absolutely no control over your grade. And if you're rewarded with a better grade, extra credit points on a paper, a higher score than you might've gotten otherwise on a test, wouldn't that outweigh any potential embarrassment? Adam and I really, really hope so.

Adam: Yeah, we really, really do.

Now, what can teachers do here? Well, first you could offer some extra credit for students who take the time to go to the writing center, or to the tutoring center, and offer some proof,, like maybe a signed slip explaining, "okay, we reviewed this and this and this in each session."

Dinur: Now, anecdotally, when I've offered extra credit - and my extra credit might be one grade step on a paper - the students who had taken their papers to the writing center were consistently get-- earning B pluses or higher, while my class average overall was a C plus or B minus - which means that they are performing at a consistently viewable higher rate than their peers.

Now, the one thing to keep in mind too, as teachers, is don't make this mandatory. This is time spent outside of class, and students may have outside obligations. Some of our students work, some of our students have families that they're taking care of. Some of our students are athletes.

However, reward the students who do take the time and the energy to make their papers better. Don't penalize those who can't do it. Reward those who do.

Adam: Another thing to think about is give copies of your assignment sheets to the writing center and the tutoring center, because this will help them guide your students in what you want, exactly, because an essay and a research paper require very different things.

Until I did this, I had students going to the writing center with their research papers and getting feedback that was more appropriate for humanities essays. And so, they would come back with tons of extra vocabulary and lots of flowery words, and I'm like, "this is not following the prompt."

"Well but this is what the writing center told me to do!"

Okay. They are also in ignorance of what you expect unless you give them the prompts. So what I would do is at the beginning of the semester, especially if you're offering this extra credit for using the writing center, make sure that you talk to the head of the writing center and give them a copy of your prompt or your assignment

sheet and say, "Please make sure that when students from my class come in that this is what they're guided on. Not on basic essay writing, cause it's not the same kind of assignment."

And the other thing is remind your students that everyone has room to improve. Remind them that you have room to improve. Having a fresh set of eyes really helps find areas of strength and weakness to address if they're really scared of using the writing center, having them go in pairs. Say "Get together with one of your classmates and both of you bring your papers to the writing center, and then you could support each other through how it feels so that you can get past that."

Dinur: Now remember as your teachers, we grade final drafts, not rough drafts, and we don't ask for the writing center's comments on rough drafts, so if you're afraid that we're going to judge you poorly for using these, hopefully this episode helps take away that source of embarrassment.

Adam: And also, in the longer term, just like if you graduate college with a 2.65 GPA, your degree is not going to have "2.65 GPA" stamped on it. It's also not going to have "used academic services" or "used disability services" stamped on it. You won't have to worry that this is going to come out and be used against you later. This is the same level of privacy as your medical records and the rest of your academic record. It's not going to be displayed as part of your degree.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 35. 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.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 36, when we'll talk about why some professors are so strict about attendance.

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

Adam: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier.

Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!