National Survey – What is a Learning Center in the 21st Century?

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Abstract

This article examines survey results from 142 colleges and universities to identify various "Learning Center" functions in higher education. Surveys completed through telephone interviews and in person at two national conferences indicate that core student success services in higher education include tutoring, workshops, disability services, and programs for at risk students. Results from a subsequent review of participating institution websites identified learning centers' mission statements and services. A final internet search found frequency of learning center names. These findings indicate Learning Centers have evolved into an essential multi-faceted student centered division of higher education, but it is growing though an identity crisis.

Determining what the Learning Center can be in the 21st Century is a difficult task because of the multiplicity of definitions and "functions" connected to the term "Learning Center." The various definitions of what a Learning Center is, what it is designed to accomplish, and what services it provides to the student gives some insight into the complex nature of the learning assistance discipline. Several definitions are dated while others are more comprehensive in design and scope. For example, one of the earliest yet most comprehensive definitions of a Learning Center is by F. Christ (1971), who stated that,

> "A Learning Assistance Center is any place where learners, learner data, and learning facilitators are interwoven into a sequential, cybernetic, individualized, people oriented system to service all students (learners) and faculty (learning facilitators) of any institution for whom learning by its students is important" (p. 39).

Several years later, G. Enright (1975) defined the Learning Assistance Center as

> ...a place concerned with [the] learning environment within and without; functioning primarily to enable students to learn more in less time with greater ease and confidence; offering tutorial help, study aids in the content areas, and referrals to other helping agencies; serving as a testing ground for innovative machines, materials, and programs; and acting as campus ombudsman (p. 81).

In an attempt to provide a more specific definition, one author discussed four areas which comprise a learning center. According to G. Peterson (1975),

> "A learning center is an amalgamation of four services: library, audiovisual service, nontraditional learning activities (including tutoring), and instructional development service (that is, the center assists faculty members in developing new teaching strategies, materials, and courses)" (p. 9).

A noted historian in learning assistance, M. Maxwell (1994), indicated that a Learning Assistance Center provides a variety of academic support to serve students, faculty, and staff in the most efficient manner. She also indicated that the director must coordinate programs and work closely with academic departments and other campus services.

A recent transformation in the model of learning centers moves toward the concept of a "learning commons," defined by S. Keating and R. Gabb (2005) as follows:

> The learning commons represents a greater functional integration of learning support than the information commons. In addition to contributions from library and IT services, the learning commons brings together other student services such as student learning support and in some cases academic staff support. The library becomes one of three or more educational partners in supporting students. (p. 3)

Initially, the integration of these services may have caused concern that each service would become diluted due to the volume of work necessary to support the large number of students requesting help. The opposite was, in fact, true for many colleges; students found the cutting edge technology and skills available through library staff supportive in avenues that varied from those traditionally found in a learning center. As both academic services and student affairs professionals come to better recognize the skills available at the library, the learning commons, which often is complete with information technology as well, can become a place to serve students of today who have already come to expect quick response to questions through the internet. It appears that an approach such as collaborations found in a learning commons may be a win-win for both, student and institution, by addressing student needs and centralizing staff and equipment. The variety of learning centers identified by this background review has set the stage for this study to see what a learning center in the 21st Century may resemble.

Method

Participants

Based on a convenience sample, 142 colleges and universities participated in this national survey, which included community colleges (N = 83) and colleges and universities (N = 59). Eleven surveys were completed by telephone; the remainder were submitted at two national conferences (the National College Learning Center Association, held in Atlanta, GA and the College Reading and Learning Association, held in Portland, OR) during 2007.

Procedures

This research was conducted via a three-pronged approach. The investigator developed a survey instrument based on the questions which were posed from previous conferences during formal presentations and informal conversations. Using the survey, researchers telephoned institutions selected from the Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS). Of the institutions contacted via telephone, many directors chose not to participate, citing the lack of time. Several indicated that they would return the call, which some did. Most of the surveys (N = 131) were completed at the National College Learning Center Association Conference and the College of Reading and Learning Association Conference. This may limit the interpretation of the findings due to the narrow focus provided by those attending the conferences; however, it was used as a sample of convenience. The second prong used the completed surveys as a reference list of institutions. This list was provided to a graduate assistant who was given directions on how to access the websites of participants in order to review online postings of mission and vision statements. The final prong was to compile all of the information and to conduct an internet search. This search, using the Google search engine, was conducted in order to determine the frequency of terms (names of centers) used.

Results

The following are descriptions of learning center services provided by the institutions participating in the survey. Table 1 highlights some of the total responses on what type of services learning centers provide.

Table 1

Number of Learning Centers Providing Selected Services

	Disability Services	Tutoring	Academic Advising	First Year Experience	Academic Improvement	Women's Center	Grant Funded Programs	At-Risk Student Services
College or University N=83	42	76	30	15	56	0	23	33
Community College N=59	17	49	21	10	36	3	12	26
Total N= 142	59	125	51	25	92	3	24	59

These services are included in some centers yet not all. Discussion is included along with the results for the wide array of services that center directors identified in their survey responses. While several of the services were identified by just one or two of the respondents, they are an important aspect of this survey, therefore, are included in this forum to maintain the integrity of the survey format and to provide complete information.

Survey Responses

The results from other survey questions are included following those for the services provided.

Responses per service.

♦ Tutoring and Academic Coaching (88% of respondents): Both are programs designed to support the student in learning specific material. According to Anoka-Ramsey Community College (2007),

> Tutoring is an age-old practice and is defined as a person giving individual or in some cases small group instruction. Content knowledge is also an essential ingredient for a tutor; however, to be truly effective, a tutor must combine content knowledge with empathy, honesty, and humor (¶1).

> The purpose of tutoring is to help students help themselves, or to assist or guide them to the point at which they become an independent learner and thus no longer need a tutor. In several schools, tutors are required to complete training that focuses on 1) learning theory, 2) study strategies, 3) communication strategies, 4) learning preferences, 5) diversity, 6) change as a process, 7) customer service, and 8) content strategies.

♦ Workshops (65% of respondents): Many colleges and universities have a unique set of skills workshops, some of which are not academic and are focused on life skills. Some of the improvement workshops include 1) managing or dealing with academic stress; 2) alternatives to medical school; 3) choosing a major; 4) dealing with procrastination; 5) being a first generation college student; 6) how to get into top MBA programs; 7) how to be successful in math/science classes; 8) reading speed; 9) internships and career preparation; 10) memorization techniques; 11) midterms and finals preparation; 12) managing money; 13) opportunities in studying abroad; 14) reading a text book; 15) test taking strategies; and, 16) living with other people. Select schools also have workshops such as grammar workshops and calculator workshops which are provided in collaboration with host academic departments. Several learning centers also provide tip sheets and online resources related to study and skill improvement.

♦ At-risk student services (41.5% of respondents): Higher education institutions are either proactive, targeting the low income or first generation students, or retroactive, providing services to those students who receive less than a 2.0 GPA. An at-risk student can also be undeclared, academically disadvantaged, have a

disability, or be in need of any developmental course. According to Ferguson (2000), the at-risk student is defined as someone who is underprepared or a person who lacks the skills necessary to meet the academic demands of higher education.

♦   Disability services (41.5% of respondents): Specific services are provided to students with various physical or mental challenges. According to the Cornucopia of Disability Information (2007), in the fall of 1986, over 12.5 million students were enrolled in the nation's postsecondary institutions. Over 1.3 million of these students (10.5%) reported having at least one disability. Schools participating in this survey indicate that academic accommodations can include making special arrangements with individual instructors to allow special seating arrangements, the use of tape recorders or other recording devices in class, and extended time for examinations. Tutors, readers, interpreters, and note takers may be available to students depending on the nature of their disability. Some students may be provided with an aide to assist them in accessing books in the library. Most of the services are designed to provide reasonable accommodations to support student learning.

♦   Academic Advising (36% of respondents): Centers provide a program designed to assist students to navigate coursework, obtain necessary referrals to campus resources, register for the next term, or obtain guidance related to academic issues. According to Tuskegee University (2007),

> Academic advising is a developmental process which assists students in the clarification of their life / career goals and in the development of educational plans for the realization of these goals. It is a decision-making process by which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchanges with an advisor; it is ongoing, multifaceted, and the responsibility of both student and advisor (¶ 1).

♦   Grant funded programs (24.6% of respondents): These respondents indicated support by internal or external grants and are designed to support student learning. Often, the general focus is primarily on students who are low income and first generation college students. Services include assistance in completing applications for financial aid and testing; academic counseling to understand each participant as a multidimensional individual with a unique combination of strengths and weaknesses; tutoring services provided for participants with academic assistance on an individual basis; and career guidance. Usually, a grant-funded program is an equal opportunity program, success program (primarily foundation based), or Federal TRiO program, e.g. Student Support Program or a state program which supports a similar population.

- ♦ Professional development services (21% of respondents): These centers are predominantly professionally based (e.g. faculty) with a few reporting some student based services. The professionally based programs include teaching and learning processes, teaching style, classroom management, and college / university rules. The student based services include preparation for high stakes tests offered through praxis classes and GRE improvement courses. Some also have PSAT / SAT improvement programs.

- ♦ First Year Experience (FYE) (18% of respondents): FYE is a program designed for the first year student who is making a transition from high school to college. According to many colleges which participated in this survey, an FYE is an academic program designed for entering college for the first time. FYE includes co-curricular elements, such as student gatherings, activities, study skills, life skills, and college success skills. The program provides an integrated and challenging experience which serves as a "starting point" to assist students to make choices leading to academic success.

- ♦ College or University Access Programs (6% of respondents): According to Lynn College (2007) access programs are defined, "as [the] students' ability to access and achieve success in higher education" (¶ 2). The foci of access programs are usually specifically designed for a particular under-represented population: low-income, first generation in family attending college, under-represented minorities, students with disabilities, and students who are returning to college later in life. Some of the specific types of programs are designed to assist students to enroll early, e.g. a summer bridge program, or to identify specific types and places of support service, in addition to those provided in the learning center itself.

- ♦ Academic Improvement Courses or Workshops: (65% of respondents): Programs are provided to support and ameliorate identified skill deficits. According to Hattie, Biggs, and Purdie (1996), some of the most prevalent student identified needs include time management, note-taking, goal setting, motivation, and basic study skills. Eberling (1998) also reports that the lack of preparation is a strong contributor to students failing to complete degree requirements.

- ♦ Women's Center: (2.1 % of respondents): Centers provide services particularly focused on women's issues. Many colleges define a women's center as a place and a resource open to all members of the college community. It is a space available for programming and events, advising and outreach, information and referral, leadership development, advocacy, meeting space and hosting various resources (books and magazines). Some women's centers work to transform discriminatory institutional structures by educating the college community about gender-related issues and the intersections of gender with race, class, and culture. Some centers also provide course work and integrate their focus into separate disciplines such as the Psychology of Women or Women in Politics.

♦ Other Categories: These include writing, math, tutor, language, computer, and testing labs. Two percent of learning centers report having language labs to support ESL students, as well as those taking foreign languages including Arabic, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish. Computer lab access is described as having computers available, which students may use on a first-come first-served basis. Testing lab services are described as testing labs where instructors may send students for the purposes of re-testing, make-up testing, and special needs testing.

Decision making results.

♦ Professional Staff: With a clear majority of responses (31%) indicating that professional staff members primarily are responsible for daily operations of running a Learning Center, anecdotal notes were used to ascertain additional information. Through many conversations with colleagues, one question asked was, "Who is in charge of or directs the activities of the learning center?" Many said that their particular learning center activities were being directed correctly; however, none seem confident that the national consensus would encourage them to change leadership toward administration, staff, or faculty. This area was also confusing to those who were completing the survey, in that 22% either provided several answers or left the questions unanswered. Subsequent questions from the survey yielded the following results.

♦ Tutoring Fees: A portion of the survey addressed the fiscal viability of learning centers. Responding to a question concerning tutoring fees, most of the respondents (96.5%) do not charge for tutoring services, and, for those who do, the fees range from minimum wage to $15.00 per hour.

♦ Learning Center Management Tracking: Center directors indicated assessing the use and need for services by tracking students and the use of program elements. Most of the centers surveyed (66.9%) track services used by students. Of those programs that track students' use of services, the majority use either a home grown system such as scan in / out with ID cards, paper and pencil, or a log book; however, many reported the use a database or spreadsheet (13.6%), e.g. Access or Excel; others use a commercial software system such as Tutortrac (9%) or Accutrack (7%).

♦ Tracking for retention / persistence of students has become a more recent addition to the job of many directors. Of those schools in this survey who responded, a majority (50.7%) indicated that they now track student retention. A method to track students is through a mechanism noted above or through the data collected by the college / university institutional research department.

Identified best practices.

Most learning centers are proud of the services they provide to students and their focus on academic success. When asked what would be considered as "best practices" in providing services in the learning center, there was a wide array of responses.

♦ Service in Response to Student Need: An overarching theme was to assist students in their academic development. Directors are proud of their flexibility and their fluid response to student needs and providing services such as expanding hours of operation based on the time of the year and the requests of the student. Several programs tout their certification (CRLA Tutor Training Program was the only certification noted) indicating they have met a national standard. Others report that centrality and a "one stop shop" is important. They report that they are located around the high traffic patterns of the student body and that they do not require the student to go to many locations for the services that are required. Several note a strong collaborative model that includes faculty liaisons, supplemental instruction, and specialized training programs. Drop-in labs and extending learning center hours, as well as drop-in tutoring to assist students with content areas, are described by many learning center programs. Additionally, many programs report that they provide instruction on study skills, and, in particular, time management issues. These study skill programs are strongly recommended to students.

♦ Assessments: Assessments that include an early alert initiative to identify at-risk students and their specific needs, coupled with early Interventions for at-risk students, are reported by several schools. These assessments focus on early identification and early treatment of the particular needs of each student through the use of skill based or deficit based instruments. Instruments such as the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (1987) by Weinstein, Palmer, and Shulte are used by institutions as a means of helping the student to identify strengths and weaknesses. As the student proceeds through answering the short statements with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all typical of me" to "Very much typical of me," individual behaviors and perceptions on ten different scales are established. The scales include anxiety, attitude, concentration, information processing, motivation, self-testing, selecting main idea, use of support techniques, time management, and test preparation and strategies. When the student has completed the assessment, the learning center professionals are able to support the strengths and enhance the skills which were weak as identified by the student. In this manner, students can overcome areas they identify as weak and become more strategic learners.

♦ Tutoring: Tutoring is another area which many schools indicate is an effective practice. For example, several schools note that open tutoring hours, individual attention, opportunities for one-on-one tutoring, peer tutoring, learning commons, and walk-in tutoring are all important services. Several programs note that trained tutors available 60 hours a week, tutors for as many majors as

possible, and providing supplemental instruction are important for their students and have resulted in higher graduation rates. An issue that was noted often includes the de-stigmatization of students who seek assistance at the learning center or tutoring center.

♦ Additional Components: Those that were identified include 1) excellent customer service; 2) flexibility of subjects supported; 3) friendliness and professionalism of the staff; 4) individual attention; 5) diagnosis related to learning issues and learning; 6) promotion of student independence; 7) providing a supportive atmosphere for students; 8) meeting the needs of the non-traditional student by providing an evening family tutoring program; 9) strong counseling program; 10) supplemental instruction; 11) tailoring programs and services to the needs of the student quickly; 12) comprehensive testing services for all students; 13) time management workshops; 14) assisting students in a manner which supports Vygotsky's Scaffolding; 15) providing web-based resource and comprehensive computer labs; 16) assisting students with comprehensive information which is located on WebCT; and, 17) providing a welcoming environment.

Reviewing Mission and Vision Statements

When reviewing the learning center mission statements posted on websites (N = 107), it became clear that most are committed to supporting and strengthening the academic experience of students. Several statements included terms to describe students' self reliance, enhancing their self-regulation, and assisting students in developing academic and educational goals. There was also a focus on empowering students to reach their full academic potential and to provide a supportive learning environment. Learning centers also promoted retention through mission statement phrases such as "to provide individualized instruction to promote retention" or "to assist students in meeting demands of college level work."

Along with the mission statements, which are predominantly student focused, some learning centers posted values in global terms. For example, one learning center website had values which include "A strong commitment to diversity and respect for all races, nationality, gender, social-economic status, sexual orientation, education, physical ability, age, faith, geographic origin, language, family background, culture, individuality, or veteran status." Others have used language to include "Customer Service," "Standards," and "Team Work," which are similar statements made by corporations and not necessarily institutions of higher learning. Another learning center's mission statement included "Providing an intellectually stimulating environment for students and faculty conducive to study and learning." This particular learning center is in the library, and as a result its focus encompasses learning for the entire campus and not just the student body.

Another component of what a learning center tries to accomplish is outlined in terms of outcome based performance. This learning center director includes that its student body will achieve one of more of the following outcomes: 1) become more independent learners; 2) increase self-confidence; 3) decrease stress level; 4) improve grades; 5) become more aware of how they learn best; 6) increase knowledge of the subject;

7) complete homework assignments; 8) achieve potential; 9) better define and solve problems; 10) become more comfortable in using technology; 11) work more often with others; and 12) prepare for their goal, e.g. transfer to another college/university, obtain employment, etc. The director may be creating a concern with this outcome based list by overlooking the responsibility of assessing and providing evidence of accomplishing any of these goals. For example, with the goal to achieve potential, is there a corresponding assessment to determine achievement potential? In addition, most of the other outcomes would require an assessment prior to the student attending the learning center in order to determine if improvement did indeed occur.

What seems to be a more contemporary mission of a learning center is to provide access to online resources and data bases. Learning centers now often include one or more computer labs which are usually outfitted with a variety of software programs and Internet and e-mail access. Several learning centers also maintain a library of reference and course materials plus study resources for graduate and licensure examinations.

Internet Name Search

Learning centers can be a powerful and integral part of a campus which encourages community and may enhance retention. It is a location where a student's major is not at issue because the focus is learning. The learning center is a space on the campus that provides access to the connective tissue—or a hub—where students can go to learn how to write, read, study, learn or do mathematic calculations, or learn a specific content area. However, uniformity in what a learning center is or what services it provides is not evident in the survey outcome. This is further complicated by the various names a Learning Center is called. The Learning Support Centers in Higher Education (LSCHE) website (December 2007) reported that there are over 140 different names given to learning centers from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.

Based on a list of names compiled from the survey respondents, an internet search (using Google search engine) was conducted as a snapshot of the same time the surveys were gathered to search the "hits" on the labels used to identify their facilities. By far, the most popular label identified was Learning Center, with 82.9%. The next most frequently name is Writing Center at 7.12%. The least popular terms for the center were Academic Skills Coaching with .0002% and Academic Enrichment and Learning with .0003%. All of the titles and number of hits when conducting an Internet search can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Learning Center Name Frequency of Participating Survey Respondents

Number of Hits	Percentage of Total Hits	Title
44,800,000	82.9003%	Learning Center
3,850,000	7.1242%	Writing Center
1,190,000	2.2020%	Learning Resource Center
1,000,000	1.8505%	Educational Center
847,000	1.5673%	Success Center
548,000	1.0140%	Center for Teaching and Learning
438,000	0.8105%	Academic Support Center
402,000	0.7439%	Tutoring Center
344,000	0.6366%	Student Success Center
308,000	0.5699%	Teaching and Learning Center
200,000	0.3701%	Learning Assistance Center
88,100	0.1630%	Academic Support Center
25,000	0.0463%	Study Skills Center
410	0.0008%	Learning Achievement Center
170	0.0003%	Academic Enrichment and Learning
120	0.0002%	Academic Skills Coaching

Note. Search was conducted November 2, 2007 using Google search engine as a snapshot in time to correlate with when the surveys were gathered. The "hits" are for each quoted term and not the number of organizations with the title in their name.

Discussion

Conducting a national study on learning center functions and services is important to the field, as well as to the personnel who work in them. Clearly, there is a better sense of the organization of learning centers; however, it is also apparent that there must be a moderate amount of refinement related to terms, titles, structure, and so on. Additionally, areas of concern arose in the survey itself with open-ended questions that allowed for such wide ranging answers, evidenced in the naming of such a center. As the future of learning centers is pondered, professionals in the field are urged to identify additional best practices that are utilized on campuses of all types. By sharing this information at conferences and through additional research and publications, colleagues may embrace and utilize them to support student learning.

As the manager of the center looks to improve what is accomplished in support of student goal attainment, juggling demands is an ongoing feat. Identification of standards that support center and student needs, yet address the overarching goals of individual colleges and universities are individually driven. While recognizing that standards for learning assistance, such as those updated in 2008 by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), the manager will need to complete an assessment and then identify the goals to work toward. It is hoped that the information from this survey helped to identify both commonalities and exceptionalities which will be considered.

Further Study

This research has resulted in some questions being answered, but

omissions related to important questions did not become apparent until the data was analyzed. For example, many of the centers indicated having similar services yet these vary in their marketing. This may cause confusion to some due to the wide array of the institutions represented in the survey where a construct may be simple for some to create and sustain while for others this can be a major struggle. Most respondents indicate having peer-tutoring, an important construct for all centers, yet peer-tutoring can also be a struggle for the staff in a 2-year institution. This is because the peer will generally only work in the second year of college. After that year, the student may graduate and move on; whereas in the 4-year institution, peer tutors may well work three or four years and sometimes even as a graduate student.

The survey shows that learning assistance is different in different institutions because of many factors specific to the type of school and its mission. A 2-year college may serve two masters, such as a terminal degree student and a transfer student, so learning assistance must serve both general and technical education. Likewise 4-year institutions serve those who enter: arriving directly from high school, transferring from a 2-year college, or entering graduate school. Each of these populations may need a variety of assistance, and it will be up to the learning assistance professional to ascertain what is necessary.

It is recommended that another national study should be conducted in order to determine information beyond structure and function. For example, what are the salaries of the director, professional staff, and faculty, as well as the tutors and supplemental instructors who work in learning centers? Related to tutoring, this survey did not assess the number of peer tutors, professional tutors, faculty tutors, or specialist (skill, writing, or math) tutors; this topic should be assessed in future research. A comprehensive set of data should be collected by all learning centers in order to support their needs and successes related to student persistence/retention. Learning center directors should be encouraged to review the best practices of other programs and integrate them into their programs.

Conclusion

These results reinforce how learning centers have evolved into a multi-faceted professional operation that addresses student success in higher education. Direct programs such as tutoring, workshops, programs for at risk students and services for students with disabilities are core aspects to learning centers in the 21st century. However, the results also indicate that learning centers are as varied as their names and provide a myriad of services that are individualized by the community college, college, or university setting. As a result, national organizations such as the Association for the Tutoring Profession (ATP), the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), and the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA) are urged to develop a working committee which can consolidate all of the similar terms and operationalize them for future study. Working with representatives to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), as well as the member organization of the Council for Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA), collaborative efforts to share the best practices in learning assistance will

support the learning center of the 21st century. However, the work of these organizations crosses many categories ranging much further than the focus of this article.

There are issues which focus on tutor training for individuals as well as programs. The work of the ATP concerning individual tutors and that of the CRLA for tutor training programs generally may address tutor needs. Recently a certification was developed by the NCLCA for learning center personnel which may be embraced by all learning center professionals. This type of certification identifies reasonable standards for the professional to reach, or aspire to, and helps to create a higher quality of leadership for a learning center program. Through identification of best practices in student service delivery, center management, training, and other areas of concern, the work of learning assistance professionals is to be appreciated for what is accomplished on a daily basis. That is providing students with access to systems which support successful completion of their goals.

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