

Program Review External Consultant Report

Learning Skills Center, California State University, Sacramento

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Introduction

The following report, which constitutes my formal evaluation of the Learning Skills Center at California State University, Sacramento, is based on a process of careful research. Prior to my visit to Sacramento, I studied the Center's extensive Self-Study, examined syllabi for its courses, and reviewed supplementary data concerning retention and graduation, pass rates in various courses, and EO #665 compliance. During my two-day visit to the campus, I reviewed its faculty's *curricula vitae* and interviewed its chair, tenured and lecturing faculty, graduate student instructors and tutors, and office staff. Beyond Learning Skills, I met with Mike Lee, Associate Vice President and Dean of Academic Programs for Academic Affairs; Jeffrey Mason, Dean, College of Arts and Letters; JoAnn Aguirre, Assistant Vice President for Educational Equity and Student Success; Marcellene Watson-Darbigney, Acting Director for Student Success; Paul Edwards, Director, Student Athlete Resource Center; Nancy Tooker, Associate Dean, College of Arts and Letters; the Program Review Team, led by Professor Mary Jane Lee; and Professors Sheree Myers and Amy Heckathorn from the Department of English. In addition, I analyzed the Center's assigned time report, sample examinations, and other documents relevant to this report. As initially charged, I directed my research primarily toward the faculty and curriculum dedicated to reading and writing, and my report reflects this focus. Furthermore, since Professor Stan Barrick, who coordinates the math program, was unavailable during my visit, I was unable to consult with him. Nonetheless, many of my observations and recommendations necessarily address the Learning Skills as a whole.

The purpose of this report is not to provide an exhaustive account of the history and current characteristics of the Learning Skills Center at CSU, Sacramento—that you already have. Rather, my intention is to concisely communicate my specific evaluative observations about this academic unit and to offer concrete recommendations—both administrative and curricular—based on these findings.

Observations

The Learning Skills Center at CSU Sacramento is an exceptionally high-functioning, cohesive, academically sound unit, conscientiously and meticulously led by its tenured faculty: Roberta Ching, Chair; Stan Barrick, Math Coordinator; and Sue McKee, Reading and Writing Coordinator. In addition to the essential leadership provided by these three tenured members of the faculty, a significant portion of the administration of the Center is enthusiastically and ably shouldered by select lecturing faculty, who supervise fellow lecturers and graduate student instructors and tutors, develop and assess curriculum, direct and assist with programs such as the Reading Institutes for Academic Preparation (RIAP) and the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), coordinate exams such as the English Diagnostic Test (EDT), and collaborate with units across campus.

The Center's course work is expertly tailored, consistently delivered, and thoughtfully modified to meet the needs of the University's developmental writing and math students. This faculty have done a particularly fine job developing and delivering curriculum for multilingual students. Furthermore, their pedagogy emphasizes not merely mechanics and technical "correctness," but broader principles of critical thinking and rhetoric essential to liberal education, principles particularly well suited to the College of Arts and Letters.

In the eight years since its last Program Review, Learning Skills has done an excellent job of responding to the challenges it has faced, building on its strengths while shoring up areas of weakness. In particular, the highly cohesion and effective pedagogy mentioned above are the direct result of these concerted efforts to move the unit forward.

The Center's involvement with CSU Sacramento's developmental math and writing students is remarkably high. Tenured faculty, lecturers, graduate student instructors and tutors, and office staff all contribute as is appropriate in efforts to place, instruct, tutor, evaluate, encourage, advise, mentor, and retain the University's underprepared students. Thus, Learning Skills has done an excellent job of executing Executive Order #665, abiding by its mandates while simultaneously providing significant support for targeted students. The range and scope of such work, while difficult to track precisely through standard institutional reporting techniques, is essential to the overall success of the University.

The Center's tenured and lecturing faculty are productively engaged in the service to the University, contributing to the GE/Graduation Requirements Committee, the EO #665 Committee, the Writing Programs Committee, the Faculty Senate, program reviews for several departments, the CAMP Summer Academy for High School Students, EOP Summer Bridge, high school outreach, and the Early Assessment Program. In addition, the tenured faculty have been active in statewide and regional educational organizations and initiatives, including California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (CATESOL), the CSU Task Force on Expository Reading and Writing, the EPT Development Committee, and the CSU English Council. Significantly, their scholarship

is often coauthored with lecturers, a fitting strategy for furthering departmental cohesiveness and enhancing professional development across the unit.

Learning Skills has cultivated cordial, smoothly functioning working relationships with academic support units at CSU Sacramento, particularly EOP, Educational Equity and Student Success, and the Student Athlete Resource Center. In addition, the Center's faculty collaborate effectively with the Department of English, successfully articulating LS 15 with English 1 and LS 86 and 87 with English 2.

Currently located on the Second Floor of Lassen Hall, in close proximity to EOP and other units, Learning Skills is well situated for its mission of serving academically underprepared students. The office and teaching space in which the Center functions is adequate to good, although cramped in some areas. For example, while the Center's office is sufficiently spacious, many lecturers work in overcrowded offices, and some classrooms are too small for the number of students enrolled.

The Center's use of pedagogical hardware and software is—in my estimation—appropriate for its developmental course work. While I am by no means an authority in this area, I am confident that the programs and equipment utilized by the Learning Skills are a good fit for their curriculum.

The Center constitutes an important site of training and professional development for graduate students, particularly M.A. candidates in Teaching English to Speakers of other languages (TESOL). Supervising labs, tutoring, and serving as Graduate Teaching Assistants, these graduate students apply and hone the skills introduced in their course work while preparing for teaching positions in community colleges and universities such as CSU Sacramento.

The Center's lecturers, graduate student employees, and office staff exhibit a high level of job satisfaction. They enjoy their work, take pride in their accomplishments, express confidence in the Center's leadership, and are entirely committed to the success of developmental math and writing students. In addition, they are consistently well trained, professional, and pleasant.

The Center's staff share duties comfortably and maintain a friendly, efficient, well-organized office. Particularly notable is the staff's high level of support for the unit's tenured and lecturing administrators, with whom they interact in a refreshingly nonhierarchical manner.

Enrollments in Learning Skills courses have increased since 2002-03, often in the range of 20%-30%, creating cramped classrooms and overburdening instructors. Teaching underprepared students, particularly in courses emphasizing reading and writing, is highly labor intensive, and thus such overcrowding is disconcerting.

As mentioned above, the Center's faculty clearly understand their academic mission, and they have tailored their courses to help underprepared students succeed in college-level

course work. Nonetheless, they have not yet articulated their student learning outcomes to students and other stakeholders with sufficient specificity and precision, nor have they explicitly expressed the exact progression or sequencing of student learning outcomes between the two levels of developmental writing. The four general learning goals that appear in their syllabi are appropriate to their curriculum, but the faculty need to develop this essential information further.

Through regularly scheduled meetings and scoring sessions, the Center's faculty are highly involved in activities and discussions that are commonly associated with assessment. Furthermore, it is clear that these activities and discussions regularly lead to significant curricular change and development—thus “closing the loop,” to use the language of assessment. However, the faculty do not refer to these important activities as *assessment* in their written accounts of the Center's work. Furthermore, what they actually reference as assessment should be more accurately classified as *scoring* or *evaluating* student work.

Recommendations

Administrative:

The Learning Skills Center is an excellent fit for CSU Sacramento and the College of Arts and Letters. Both its current academic placement in the College of Arts and Letters and its physical location in Lassen Hall are highly appropriate and should be maintained.

The Center's three tenure-track/tenured faculty provide leadership crucial to the unit's overall success. These positions, therefore, should be maintained beyond the careers of the current incumbents, who plan to retire in the next few years. Professor Ching's proposal to search for a tenure-track replacement for Professor Barrick, who will retire in 2008, is prudent and should be supported. I recommend that the department search for a highly qualified specialist in mathematics education who can provide leadership in developmental education for both CSU Sacramento and the CSU as a whole. Considering the CSU's longstanding concern over underprepared students, such a specialist would be positioned to figure in important statewide discussions and decision-making. Professor Ching's and Professor McKee's positions should also be filled with tenure-track faculty when they choose to retire. With these replacements, the Learning Skills will continue to fulfill its vital mission.

Given the labor-intensive nature of developmental teaching, the Center's recommendation that their class enrollments be reduced “back to 2002-03 levels as soon as practical” is highly warranted.

The healthy, cooperative relationship between the Learning Skills and the Department of English suggests that the current division of developmental writing courses is appropriate. Learning Skills should continue to offer LS 15, 86, and 87; and English should continue to be responsible for English 1 and 1X.

Curricular:

Given the centrality of specific, precisely articulated student learning outcomes to twenty-first-century higher education, Learning Skills should develop and communicate more explicit, extensive outcomes to their students and other stakeholders, both on and off campus. Particular attention should be paid to using concrete verbs that suggest measurable skills and capacities and to sequencing these outcomes so that they demonstrate the specific academic progress students achieve as they work through the developmental program. The outcomes for the second level of developmental writing should reflect the more rhetorically based capacities championed by the CSU Task Force on Expository Reading and Writing.

Learning Skills should more clearly identify its significant assessment efforts as *assessment*, explicitly distinguishing these activities from *scoring* and *evaluation*. This adjustment, while rather minor—will clarify what appears to be a lack of understanding of assessment on the faculty’s part, demonstrating in more explicit terms the Center’s successful efforts to continually assess its program and—whenever possible—“close the loop.”

Conclusion

It has been a great pleasure to research and report on this outstanding academic unit. The brevity of my recommendations for change within the Learning Skills Center is the result of my highly favorable impressions of its faculty and their accomplishments. If I can clarify any elements of this report, or if I can be service in the future, do not hesitate to call on me.