EVERYTHING
You Ever Wanted To Know About Learning Centers
(And Then Some...)
e-Book Sample of Introduction and Chapter 1

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Table of Contents

Introduction
Chapter 1: History
Chapter 2: Defining Learning Centers
Chapter 3: Establishing A Learning Center
Chapter 4: Learning Center Facilities
Chapter 5: Programs And Services
Chapter 6: Brokerage And Partnerships
Chapter 7: Management And Staffing
Chapter 8: Professional Development And Recognition
Chapter 9: Publicity And Public Relations
Chapter 10: Evaluation Of The Learning Support Center
Chapter 11: Challenges And Opportunities

Appendices

• Appendix 1: Some Promising Practices for Learning Support Centers [F.L. Christ/NCLCA, 2005]
• Appendix 2: CLADEA's Compilation of Essential Readings
• Appendix 3: Tutor Training Bibliography (from crla.net)

References

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Colleges and universities are recognizing, in ever-increasing numbers, the necessity of providing academic support services for their students. A component of those services is learning centers. Learning centers may have many different iterations and any number of names, but their primary purpose is the same – to help students succeed academically.

Your school has decided that it is time to create a learning center on your campus and a senior administrator has just charged you with the task of developing and operating the new center. You have no experience with learning centers and have no idea where to begin. That is the purpose of this book. Hopefully, by the time you have finished the last page you will have clarified the following:

- the purpose of your new center
- the design of your space
- the services that you should offer the students on your campus
- the selection and training of your staff
- methods for marketing your services
- the professional development opportunities that are available for you and your employees
- the evaluation of your operation.
While some form of learning support has been around for a long time, the learning assistance center concept was introduced by Frank Christ, the recognized father of learning assistance, in the early 1970s (Christ F. L., Systems for Learning Assistance: Learners, Learning Facilitators, and Learning Centers, 1971). An awareness that entering first-year students had some shortcomings in their academic abilities was voiced by Francis Wayland to the trustees at Brown University as early as 1841 (Brown W., 2014). A pioneer in the field of learning assistance, Martha Maxwell reported that some form of formal or informal learning support had been provided since the opening of the first colleges in the United States (CAS, 2007). The demographics and unique needs of the college students at a particular point in time drove the development of learning assistance from its infancy into its current form. As David Arendale, a recognized expert on Supplemental Instruction wrote: “The expansion of services to more students was not due to an intelligent plan or pre-existing educational theory, but as a natural response to growing needs by an increasingly heterogeneous college student body” (Arendale D. R., 2004).

Early learning assistance was available to a limited segment of the population, privileged white males. From the 1600s to the 1820s, this group had access to tutoring. Between the 1830s and 1860s, educators added pre-collegiate preparatory academies to tutoring, but their availability was still limited to white males of the upper
class (Arendale D. R., 2004). Over the next hundred years, learning assistance activities grew to include remedial education classes within the college preparatory programs and later the integration of remedial courses within the tutoring programs and compensatory education. The demographic served, however, was still mostly white males (Arendale D. R., 2004).

In looking at the sheer numbers, the greatest influx of underprepared students into higher education came as the result of the signing of the GI Bill by President Roosevelt in 1945 as World War II ended. Thousands entered the nation’s colleges and universities with many lacking the skills needed to achieve academic success (Brown W. , 2014). Services opened to new population groups after the 1980s. The general student population attending institutions of higher learning and many nontraditional students became part of the mix. The term nontraditional student frequently was used to describe a significant percentage of the current student population. Gwyn Enright, a faculty member at San Diego City College and highly respected in the field of learning assistance, described this very diverse group of students as those who may be older, first-generation college students, married with children or single, and employed full-time in the workforce, or foreign-born. Some may never have finished high school and came to college without the requisite skills to succeed at the college level. Still, others may have left high school and later earned an equivalency degree (Enright, 1997).

One of the earliest documented forms of learning assistance
was the publication of the first “how to study” books for high school and college students in 1916 (Maxwell, 1997). The first “learning to learn” book developed exclusively for college students was published in 1929, and it included a very comprehensive collection of learning skills such as note-taking, listening skills, textbook reading, time management, library skills, studying for and taking exams, and strategies for mastering content area. The creation of these books was a part of an organized effort on the part of higher education to implement an academic support system for underprepared students.

Enright identified this period from 1916 to 1940 as the Age of Clinical Aspiration when student support efforts became more scientific in their approach (Enright, 1994). Schools developed study skills courses that had a more formal structure including evaluation based on testing, grades, persistence, and other factors.

Study methods laboratories and a focus on reading as the most necessary skill was seen as a scientific panacea during the 1930s. While the support for remedial reading programs was popular during the 1940s, it fell into disfavor during Enright’s Age of Disenchantment between 1940 and 1950. The biggest problem facing the reading efforts was an inability to individualize a remedial program based on the needs of students and diagnosis of their reading needs. The realization that reading remediation did not address other factors that might be hindering a student’s academic success led to Enright’s next period of learning assistance from 1950 to 1960, the Age of Integration, in which the approach was holistic.
The argument for this approach was that some factors work together to ensure a student’s academic success and to accept that students do not learn the same way nor do they have the same weaknesses (Enright, 1994).

During this period, learning assistance programs were guided by the following tenets: diagnosis, individualization, integration, development (as opposed to remedial), and “student-centered rather than content-centered” (Enright, 1994, p. 34). Following Enright’s Age of Actualization from 1960 to 1970, self-paced, individualized instruction for students needing academic support became a reality. Instructional technology became affordable and provided the means for addressing a student’s specific needs. Materials could be programmed to supplement and reinforce course content, as well as offering reading and study-skills support.

The Age of Systematization followed in 1970. By this time, the plethora of names for learning assistance centers reflected the diversity of center origins and functions (Enright, 1994). The year marked the beginning of the learning assistance center concept as introduced by Frank Christ. According to Christ, learning support centers had six purposes:

- higher course grades for participating students
- a central location for students to receive tutorial assistance
- a referral source to other helping agencies
- a comprehensive library of essential study aids
• a training agency for paraprofessionals, peer counselors, and tutors
• a center for faculty development (Arendale D. R., 2004).

As Enright wrote, “The next stage in the history of the Learning Assistance Center may well be its systematic integration into the campus as a whole – taking its rightful place as the support service for the academic community” (Enright, 1994). As Enright saw it, the 1970s would “bring together the isolated components derived from varying factors into an organic, responsive and accountable support organization operating out of a facility offering a relaxed ecology – the Learning Assistance Center” (Enright, 1994, p. 37).

As learning centers move into the future, organization, names, and services will, no doubt, change over time in response to current student and faculty needs. A growing number of learning assistance centers have evolved into teaching and learning centers that, with their expansion, provide faculty development services (Arendale D. R., 2004). The growing trend toward distance learning has created a need for online learning support and the creation of virtual learning centers. Arendale advised learning center directors to “be proactive of impending campus needs and seek to be partners in meeting them” (Arendale D. R., 2004, p. 18).

Summary

Learning support efforts began concurrently with the beginning of higher education. The learning assistance center concept, however, was introduced by Frank Christ in the 1970’s.
In the beginning, access to higher education was limited to wealthier white males. Such was the case with learning assistance but, over the years, services gradually became available to more student populations. The face of learning support evolved over the years passing through stages: the Age of Clinical Aspiration, the Age of Disenchantment, the Age of Integration, the Age of Actualization, and, finally, the Age of Systemization.

Learning centers directors, to be successful, should keep the functions of their learning centers in mind as they structure their centers. Christ presented six purposes of learning support centers. Learning centers are still evolving in response to current trends that include the move toward teaching and learning centers, and virtual learning centers to support online learning.

The next chapter looks at the possible formats that can define the foundation for a learning assistance program.