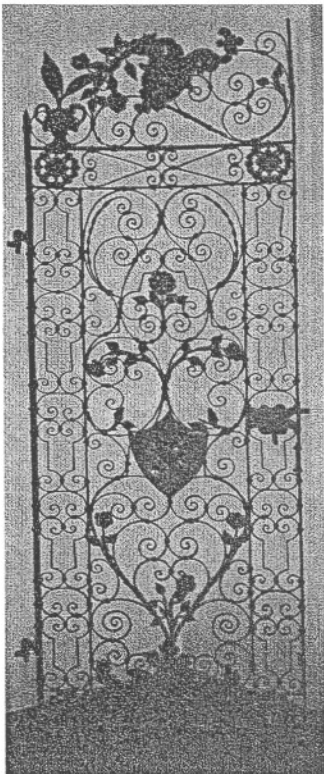


LDC *Lately...*

Learning Development Center

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Obstacles to Learning Issue

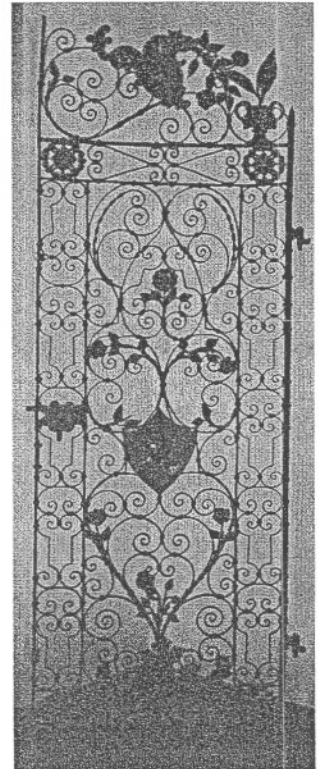
★ Workshop and
Lunch 'n' Learning
Schedule enclosed



Obstacles to Learning

Stephen, a first-year student in your class, has just earned a D on the midterm exam. He comes to see you during your office hours and tells you that he never had any grade lower than a B+ in high school, and that he scored 1298 on the SATs. He hangs his head and mumbles that he is thinking about leaving RIT. As his professor, what conclusions might you draw about Stephen? What should he do next?

- A. He is going through a normal period of adjustment to college. He needs a little encouragement, and he would benefit from learning study strategies.
- B. He must be spending too much time socializing. He needs to spend more time on his studies.
- C. He has a learning disability, ADD, and test anxiety. He needs to be evaluated so that he can be approved for accommodations.
- D. He is depressed. He needs to talk to someone at the Counseling Center.



This is a trick question because the answer is "it depends." Any or all of the choices could be correct, or other factors may be involved. This scenario does not give enough information to diagnose Stephen's problem accurately, but he trusts you and is counting on you for direction and support. How can you equip yourself to guide Stephen through his crisis? Where can you refer him for help? This quarter's LDC Lately addresses these questions by giving an overview of a wide range of student behaviors that interfere with academic performance. Our focus in this issue is the traditional 18 to 22 year old student.

TYPICAL DEVELOPMENTAL BEHAVIOR

Why is it that Jason, a whiz at calculus, is not able to get to his 9:00 class on time? Why does Sara, who appears confident and independent, call her parents every night? Why does one class work well with independent projects, and another class need to be guided through every step of the process?

The answer is that these college students are going through the normal transitions of young adulthood, a time when it is developmentally appropriate for them to be in search of themselves. It is a time of trial and error and of testing boundaries, of growth spurts in some areas and developmental lags in others, of unexpected discoveries and disappointments. Young adults in this stage may be frustrated, inconsistent, and confused, but they are taking an essential step in their growth process. Instructors should worry if students are NOT engaged in facing the challenges of redefining themselves as adults.

We have identified five typical challenges faced by college students. For each challenge, we describe characteristics of the effective student. Then we describe their ineffective classmates, whose coping strategies miss the mark.

Challenge 1: Finding Balance

EFFECTIVE: able to deal with the shift in behavioral expectations from one environment to another.

INEFFECTIVE:

- “The Valedictorian” -- able to shine in high school with minimal effort; expects these habits to work equally well in college.
- “The Social Butterfly” -- has been eagerly looking forward to freedom from supervision, curfews, and parental guidelines, but is not prepared to exercise self-discipline.

Challenge 2: Being Prepared

EFFECTIVE: has the basic skills for academic work in college; is emotionally independent; has basic life skills.

INEFFECTIVE:

- “The Ill-prepared” -- missing basic academic skills, especially in mathematics and language, perhaps because of poor high school preparation or because English is not the native language.
- “The Immature” -- heavily dependent on family; does not have self-management skills; often appears disorganized or irresponsible; does not know how to do laundry or manage a checkbook, or if he does know how, he doesn't do it.

Challenge 3: Managing Systems and Navigating the Institute

EFFECTIVE: understands that higher education is a complex system of rules, policies, and regulations; learns the expectations; accepts the politics of the institution as a fact of life.

INEFFECTIVE:

- “The Innocent” -- does not know how the institution works; does not understand policies for grades, registration, financial aid, etc.; suffers the consequences of missing deadlines or not taking appropriate action.

- “The Manipulator” -- knows the rules, but tries to work around them; wants to be the exception; wastes time trying to change the system.

Challenge 4: Fitting into the Culture

EFFECTIVE: able to relate to peers; comfortable with the major, college, and institute.

INEFFECTIVE:

- “The Recluse” -- spends most of the time alone; rarely leaves room; avoids other people; may spend a great deal of time with computer games or in Internet chat rooms.
- “The Undecided” -- knows he is in the wrong major; does not know what he wants to do, and does not know how to find out.
- “The Misplaced” -- is simply in the wrong school; may prefer a college that is smaller, larger, more cosmopolitan, more isolated, warmer, more general, more focused.

Challenge 5: Dealing with Life

EFFECTIVE: resilient; equipped to handle multiple and unexpected crises related to health, family, finances, friends; knows how to say no; knows where to go for help and is willing to accept it.

INEFFECTIVE:

- “The Overwhelmed” -- lacks confidence or experience when dealing with personal crises; lacks resources or support for finding solutions to problems.
- “The Strong/Silent” -- rigid and stubborn; refuses to seek help; tries to deal with problems alone.
- “The Giver” -- has not learned to set boundaries; takes on responsibility for everyone else; spends time helping others with their problems while ignoring own needs.

ROADBLOCKS, SNAGS, AND RED FLAGS

We expect students to bring ineffective behaviors with them to college; rarely do they come with the ability to handle all of the developmental challenges effectively. However, during their college careers, as they learn more about the world and themselves, most students find their way. But not all. A few remain locked into ineffective patterns or struggle with serious barriers to academic success.

We immediately think of drugs and alcohol as two of the serious barriers. RIT, like most colleges and universities, is painfully aware of the damage substance abuse has done to young lives. RIT has responded with a new strict alcohol policy, a full-time drug/alcohol health educator, and an on-campus chapter of AA.

Disabilities have become increasingly recognized as barriers to college success. RIT is better equipped than most universities to make accommodations, and both faculty and students have made great strides in acknowledging a disability as a fact of life rather than a stigma. This change in attitude has, in fact, impacted the number of students willing to disclose disabilities and seek appropriate support. So far this year, 560 students are registered with the Disabilities Coordinator's Office. Systems are in place to provide note takers, taped-texts, and extended-time testing.

Recently at the LDC, we have seen evidence of new “red flag” patterns that bear watching, including eating and sleeping disorders, side effects of medications, computer addiction, and credit card debt.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Faculty and staff are often the first to recognize a problem, or they may be the student's first place to

reach out for help. How you handle the situation can impact that student, for better or worse. Here are our suggestions:

- **Be available**

Personal contact with faculty and staff matters. You can offer encouragement and faith in the student's ability to meet challenges.

- **Contribute to a sense of community**

Belonging matters -- whether it is to a department, college, or organization. (See last quarter's LDC Lately for an article on the power of community.)

- **Be informed**

Familiarize yourself with normal developmental behavior and become sensitive to the red flags that point to trouble.

- **Make appropriate referrals**

Intervention matters. Become familiar with the resources on campus; learn what they can and cannot do for both the student and you. A call ahead may make the contact less stressful for the student and facilitate diagnosis and support.

- **Stay calm**

Overreacting shuts down the thinking process for both you and the student, and it can frighten the student unnecessarily. Students will very quickly pick up on your anxiety.

- **Don't jump to conclusions**

If you suspect an undiagnosed disability or an addiction, gently but firmly steer the student to the LDC, the Student Health Center, or the Counseling Center. A premature or inaccurate diagnosis makes it hard for the student to be open to other possibilities, and it interferes with a professional's diagnosis.

- **Remember demographics**

In our increasingly diverse population, students have different cultural and family expectations for their academic performance.

Also, older students who have been away from school for a long time bring their own unique expectations and worries. Keep in mind the way your message may be perceived by your student.

The primary focus of the LDC is academic issues. However, if you are unclear about whether your student's problem is an academic issue or something else, refer the student to LDC's Academic Assessment, and we will sort it out. (See Academic Assessment Referral Checklist for guidelines.)

ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT in the LDC

WHY do students come to Academic Assessment in the LDC?

Many students are referred to the Academic Assessment Program in the LDC by RIT faculty; however, students may be self-referred or referred by advisors, counselors, parents, or health care personnel.

Concerns about academic performance are the primary reasons for these referrals. However, there are many other patterns of behavior that may warrant a referral from a faculty or staff member. (See the "Academic Assessment Referral Checklist")

WHO is the typical student seeking an Academic Assessment?

There is no typical profile for students seeking an academic assessment in the LDC. We see freshmen and graduate students, full-time and part-time students, students with impeccable academic skills and those who are struggling to meet basic expectations, students with GPAs of .05 and students on the Dean's List. The common issue is usually that the student is not meeting his or someone else's expectations.

HOW does a student set up an Academic Assessment?

The student should call the main office of the LDC at 475-6682 (V/TTY) or stop by Room-2309 in the Eastman Building. The personnel in the main office will schedule an intake interview with an assessment specialist. Before the scheduled intake interview, the student will be asked to read an informational handout and complete a brief checklist.

WHAT HAPPENS at the intake interview?

The student meets with an assessment specialist for a comprehensive two-hour interview. At this interview, the student is asked specific information about his/her educational history, learning preferences, career choice, health, family/peer situations, personal interests, and other concerns. At the conclusion of the intake interview, the student is provided with the recommendations of the interviewer and options for further action. Sometimes further screening of academic skills is necessary.

WHAT happens NEXT?

The student may be referred to another person or agency to continue to address the issues of concern or the difficulty. Possible scenarios for referrals include the following:

- **Academic concerns...** assessment of academic skills through diagnostic testing and referral to appropriate support programs, (i.e.- LDC Math Lab, LDC Writing Lab, Office of Special Services Tutoring, Physics Study Center, etc.);

• **Study Skill concerns...** referral to the noontime "Lunch 'n' Learning" series or a study skills instructor in the LDC;

• **Career concerns** ...referral to the Career Decision Program or career counseling at the RIT Counseling Center;

• **Health concerns...** referral to the RIT Student Health Center or appropriate off-campus agency;

• **Family/Peer issues...** referral to other agencies depending on the type of issue (could range from the RIT Counseling Center to Residence Life);

• **Drug/Alcohol issues...** referral to a drug/alcohol counselor at the RIT Counseling Center;

• **Depression/eating disorders/compulsive or addictive behaviors...** referral to the RIT Counseling Center;

• **Support for a previously diagnosed learning disability/physical disability or attentional disorder** ...referral to the Disabilities Coordinator for an accommodations letter and then referrals to Academic Accommodations, the Office of Special Services and/or LDC's fee-based Learning Support Services.

In most cases, these steps assist the students in figuring out what is blocking them from meeting expectations. Remember...students often have a multitude of interfering issues. For example, reading problems may exist in conjunction with alcohol abuse, roommate concerns, credit card debt, and eating disorders. Student concerns are seldom one layer. We encourage students to view their concerns holistically and to accept that they may need

assistance from several of the programs and individuals here at RIT. All academic assessment information is kept confidential unless the student signs a release form providing consent to share the information.

WHAT IF the source or cause of the problem is not clear?

If there is no clear connection between a student's actions and his academic performance, for a more thorough assessment outside of RIT may be necessary. A student may have a long-standing, undiagnosed learning problem such as a specific learning disability or an attentional disorder. If the assessment specialist suspects that this is the case, she will discuss with the student options for a more extensive evaluation. Evaluations can be done by professionals either in the student's hometown or in the Rochester area. Sometimes, the assessment specialists can facilitate referrals to local consulting psychologists and physicians.

WEB RESOURCES:

Computer Addiction:
<http://netaddiction.com>

Sleep Disorders
<http://sleepfoundation.org>

**Spending Addiction/
Credit Card Debt**
<http://www.mmintl.org>
<http://www.fool.com/credit/credit.html>

Depression
<http://www.psychologyinfo.com/depression/index.html>

Abuse
<http://www.edc.org/hec/pubs/binge.htm>

Drug Abuse
<http://www.nida.nih.gov/Infofax/Clubdrugs.html>

ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT REFERRAL CHECKLIST:

If you see any of the following as being consistent or on-going patterns, a referral to Academic Assessment may be appropriate.

- _____ Is the student unable to clearly express the source of his or her academic difficulty?
- _____ Does the student seem to consistently need more help than you can provide in the time you have available?
- _____ Is there usually a discrepancy between the student's classroom performance and test grades?
- _____ Does the student seem to be unusually overwhelmed by the pace and demands of RIT?
- _____ Are organization and time management frequent problems?
- _____ Does the student fall asleep in class often?
- _____ Does the student appear genuinely committed to improving his/her performance while in your office, but rarely able to act on those intentions?
- _____ Does the student generally seem more animated when discussing courses outside his/her major?
- _____ Does the student frequently complain about the time it takes to complete textbook reading assignments?
- _____ Does the student continue to struggle with math courses in spite of utilizing math labs, participating in study groups, and/or repeating courses numerous times?