Instructional Specialist Program Review for 12/8/09 PRAC Meeting

Program Purpose

The purpose of the English Instructional Specialist (IS) program is to give support to students and faculty by giving feedback to students on their writing via tutoring and paper commenting. The tutoring program provides a much needed service to our students, for it is convenient and accessible. Fully staffed by both faculty and Instructional Specialists, the English Lab/Writing Center is open all day Monday through Thursday and part day on Fridays so that daytime and evening students can drop in for tutoring and have direct access to instruction, modeling and guidance. While the current IS Program is and has been successful, improvements could be made. The purpose of this Program Review is to examine relevant research and data and explore areas for improvement in the IS program.

An active social medium for learning, tutoring is a common and necessary form of support in colleges, for it has a significant effect on college persistence (Kochler 1987; Vincent 1983). Research has shown that students who actively engage with faculty, staff and other students at their colleges are much more likely to succeed in attaining their educational goals (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1995; CCSSE, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006). A key finding of the Kuh study: “Students who find something or someone worthwhile to connect with in the postsecondary environment are more likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities during college, persist, and achieve their educational objectives.” This finding suggests that the success of a student greatly depends on motivation and learning cultivated by social connections, including the connections they make with tutors or Instructional Specialists

Known locally as Readers, Instructional Specialists are also responsible for supporting a designated English instructor, by providing written responses and comments on their student papers. Each semester an instructor will be given a Reader assignment, an IS who may or may not be familiar with the course curriculum and expectations. Both faculty and Instructional Specialists agree that the
reader/instructor/student relationship works best when there is a high level of communication and when the course curriculum and teacher’s expectations are clear.

A majority of the English students supported by the IS program are in the Basic Skills Pathway. In Fall 2004, Fall 2005 and Fall 2006, over 90% of English students were placed below English 150. Eventually some of these students wind up in the Transfer pathway. According to Robert Kennedy, a research facilitator at COM, in the years 2000 – 2007, close to 20% of students who transferred had taken English 98.

Unfortunately, success and progress rates have plenty of room for improvement. The rate of progress for English students is significantly lower at COM than at other schools. For example, the rate of progress at Evergreen College is 46.34%. At Santa Barbara City College the rate is 44.57%. At Chabot/Los Positas the rate is 49.56%. At De Anza it is 54.08%, while at COM the rate stands nearly 20% lower at 34.86%. In a separate cohort study conducted at College of Marin, of the 91 students who passed English 92 in Fall 2001, only 17 had passed English 150 by Fall 2006. This number is significant because it means that less than 20% of the students in English 92 succeeded in completing English 150 (Freshman English) even after a five year period of time (BSI Steering Cohort Data). In addition, the cohort study also found that of the 29 students who passed English 98SL in Fall 2001, only two students passed English 150 by Fall 2006 (BSI Cohort Data). These statistics beg the question: What explains these low rates of success?

While there are many possible factors for these low rates, one possible reason is the lack of coordination between the courses and labs in English and College Skills, since research shows that highly coordinated or centralized developmental programs are components of programs that are successful (The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, 16-17). That students must navigate a system that does not have a built-in and systematic early warning system when they are at risk, and thus assumes that they have the necessary organizational schema to take initiative is another, related reason for
this low rate of progress (The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, 53-54). Another possible reason may be that the English Composition curriculum needs better alignment. The English Department has initiated a series of alignment meetings and discussions to address this concern. Whatever the case may be, strengthening the IS program, where students can receive one-on-one support from professional experts outside of class time, hold great promise for improving the progress and success rates of our students.

Research has shown that the most effective commenting practices directly reflect instruction in the classroom. When an Instructional Specialist works as a reader, she makes paper comments, and she risks making comments that are disconnected from the course curriculum. Most readers do not attend the course for which they are reading due to scheduling conflicts and, therefore, most likely are not connected to the course curriculum and day-to-day business of student learning. The result of making comments in isolation is examined by the research of Hillocks (1986) who indicates that isolated comments are less effective than teacher’s comments that are focused and related to some aspect of instruction. Research also suggests that the practice of making isolated comments contradicts the very social nature of learning which is best achieved by “a meaningful context” that is “sensitive to the cognitive, emotion and social needs of the learner (Casazza, 1996, 8). Another related issue is that when the Instructional Specialist makes comments on the paper, often it is the IS who gauges the student learning, rather than the teacher, which does not work to the teacher’s advantage. Teachers need feedback in order to conduct their own research about the progress of a class (Cross and Angelo, 1993). While teachers commonly read and review the comments made by an IS, having much of the commenting be done by another person can potentially distance the instructor from this feedback loop, or weaken it.

Furthermore, when IS’s make comments on papers, then students often must wait until over a week has passed, since IS’s are given a week to return the papers, which then in turn must be read by the instructor. This delayed feedback—a week to two weeks— is disputed by research which shows that learners benefit most from prompt feedback (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). Frequent and prompt
assessment is especially important for the mastery of learning of developmental students (Boylan, 2002; Boylan and Saxon, 2002). One possible solution to this problem would be to institute verbal comments from the I.S’s rather than written comments, where students meet with I.S’s to discuss their papers.

There have been discussions for years now about possible ways to strengthen the IS program. For example, the IS handbook has not been revised for many years, and on-going professional development for IS’s has been sporadic. The students enrolling in developmental English classes are increasingly bi- or multi-lingual, yet little has been done to support IS’s in working with this population. Many IS’s have received temporary increases in their assignments each semester, without those increases being made permanent even after many years; some are not eligible for retirement benefits because of this. Continuing such temporary increases undermines the stability of the program and the morale of the ISs. One way to strengthen the IS Program and therefore improve the success rates of students would be through the development of a Reading Apprenticeship (RA) Program (The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, 42-43). “The RA method emphasizes met cognitive processes that the teacher models and the student uses to gain confidence and strategies for self reliance in reading activities. In addition, RA helps students develop awareness that ‘reading is just like writing: a process of cognitive and social construction in which everyone builds up meanings from cues in the texts.’”

Another, related way to strengthen the IS Program and therefore improve the success rates of students would be through the development of an SI (Supplemental Instruction) program, such as the RAD program developed at American River College. SI is proven to be an effective practice in supporting basic skills students because it focuses on empowering the student while developing the student’s met cognitive skills. The student takes an active role in the decision making and determines the direction of assistance (Casazza and Silverman, 1996). In the RAD program, faculty and tutors are trained to work on-on-one and in small groups with students by incorporating a number of collaborative and review techniques. These techniques are tightly coordinated with the student’s course as well as the instructor of the course. In one three semester long study of the effectiveness of the RAD program,
the overall success rate of RAD students was 84.5% as compared to 60.3% for non-RAD students. The success rate by ethnicity is even more impressive. African Americans in the non-RAD group had a success rate of 41.2% while African Americans in the RAD group showed a 78.9% success rate. The success rate of Hispanics was even higher--84.3% (American River College’s NCCRA Conference Presentation, 2005). The RAD Program’s high degree of structure and tight coordination with the course and its instructor are considered primary reasons for the success of this program.

General Recommendations

1) Formal, periodic IS professional development should be supported by COM:

   - IS’s should receive professional development in holistic evaluation of a student’s reading and writing.
   - IS’s should receive professional development in the teaching of composition (reading and writing).
   - IS’s should receive professional development in working with ESL and DSPS students.

2) The IS Program could benefit from the development of an RA Program and/or an SI Program like the RAD Program at American River College.

Other Broader Recommendations

--The College should make a commitment to maintaining IS support levels, and when possible, to commit to at least 20 hours/week of permanent assignments for IS’s, to provide stability.

--Faculty in English, College Skills and ESL and Instructional Specialists should discuss and collaborate on an appropriate tutor training model for Instructional Specialists.

--Consideration needs to be given to supporting students in the ESL Lab.
--Consideration needs to be given to supporting students at IVC.

--The College should make a financial commitment to provide regular systematic IS staff development opportunities (training) focused on the following areas:

- Desktop publishing with Microsoft Word 2007
- Sound learning theory
- The teaching of composition
- Cultural responsiveness
- Support for ESL/L2 Learners

-- English faculty could develop a corequisite “guided practice” course in which the lab curriculum and the tutoring in the lab is more tightly coordinated with class curriculum.

-- The IS supervisor should encourage a culture wherein tutors are in the classroom with the students. To this end, the IS supervisor should enable IS support in the classroom by creating a schedule that avoids scheduling conflicts between the lab assignment and other IS assignments—that is, the time of the instructor’s course to which the Instructional Specialist is assigned. In order for this to happen, IS’s need to provide the IS supervisor with enough available times to do this.

-- The College should designate an administrator or faculty member whose primary responsibility is to coordinate the Developmental program.

--The Instructional Specialist program should undergo regular program evaluation.