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Education's Most Damaging "Urban Legend"

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An "urban legend" is a story or belief that has been told, retold and told yet again. Because the tale is repeated so often and so widely, it comes to be viewed as "fact". However, these stories are generally exaggerated, expanded or even totally untrue.

Education has its share of urban legends: competition maximizes student performance; girls are smarter than boys; gifted kids don't need specialized services...they will make it on their own; bullying is merely a rite-of-passage; the cafeteria sandwiches were made before the Clinton administration, etc., etc.

But no urban legend is more untrue – or damaging – than the one that I often hear as I walk the halls of America's high schools:

Teacher – to – Student:

"I can't give you extra help or extra time. You surely won't get that kind of help when you go off to college next year!"

Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!

Many of America's high school teachers are seemingly unaware of the extensive services available to college students with learning problems. In point of fact, these students WILL "get that kind of help when they go off to college." The belief that the struggling college student is "on his own" is outdated and simply untrue. Nearly every college and university in America has established Learning Centers that provide guidance and assistance to students with diagnosed learning and attention disorders. Oftentimes, these services are more extensive and effective than the services found in our high schools. Any high school teacher who feels that colleges have a "succeed or leave" attitude has simply not visited a university campus recently! It is time that we put this urban legend to rest.

Our goal as high school teachers should be to instruct these students how to use the Learning Center effectively and efficiently...not to frighten them unduly by weaving circa 1970 tales of college's unresponsiveness to the needs of struggling students.

My travels last month brought these issues into clear relief for me. I spent a wonder-filled day with the students and staff of the LEAD Program at Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado. This project is designed to provide college-bound students the support and guidance that they need in order to make the treacherous transition from high school to the university setting. This innovative program was initiated to offer students academic assistance but, along the way, LEAD became so much more than that. As one senior told me, "LEAD has become like my second family."

About the worst thing you can do to an adolescent is to make him "different" in some way. Adolescence demands uniformity and a "sameness" that separate the teenager from his younger siblings and his parents. Anything that makes a teen different from his peers is immediately suspect and rejected. However, the magic of LEAD is that everyone in the group is different...so different isn't different any more. The student-decorated LEAD room, with its couches and easy chairs, becomes a haven and a safe harbor for the student who struggles every day with the demands of secondary curriculum. They gather strength, information and inspiration from their sessions in the LEAD room. They contribute to the common good by mentoring younger students and assisting and welcoming the underclassmen. Their

relationships with their teachers are wonderful to observe. These relationships are based on mutual respect and genuine affection...two concepts that are sadly lacking in many of today's high schools.

The LEAD students recognize and cherish the significant contribution that the program has made to their academic and social progress. They learn study skills, coping strategies and self-advocacy from their instructors...and from one another. They are so convinced of the value of LEAD that they have designed a "road show" wherein they visit schools and conferences throughout the United States to teach faculties how to create LEAD Programs in their schools. When I visited them, they were preparing to go to North Carolina to deliver their workshop to graduate students there. And who was scheduled to escort the trip? No one less than the Superintendent of Schools. Now, THAT'S an administrative commitment.

The LEAD students are not only helping themselves and each other, but are also assisting students in other programs that they have never even met.

As the saying goes, "Do not follow the beaten path. Rather, go where others have not dared...and leave a trail for others."

Another event that solidified my faith in post secondary education for students with learning disabilities was my visit to Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida. This renowned college should serve as a model to other American colleges in regard to the establishment of programs that allow student with learning problems to reach their fullest potential. Their special programs – which enjoy the support of the highest level of Lynn's administration – provide support and guidance for the students AND the professors who work with them. Although attendance at my all day workshop was not mandatory, one hundred of the University staff attended and participated in the seminar. They were an extraordinarily attentive and involved audience and were eager to learn strategies that would enable them to work more effectively and efficiently with their students. They viewed the inclusion of special needs students as an opportunity...not an obstacle! As one professor told me, "Working with these kids has made me a better teacher!"

The college student with a learning disability requires unique and individual strategies in order to ensure classroom success. Modifications, accommodation and adjustments must be made in order to compensate for his learning problems. However, the wise professor (like those at Lynn) comes to realize that these strategies are useful and effective for all students who may be experiencing temporary problems or difficulties.

An example – a professor I know was working with a student in his history class who had great difficulty meeting the deadlines for the various papers and projects that were required for the class. The student's first semester in the two-semester course was frustrating for him and the instructor and the student required several "extensions" in order to successfully fulfill the course requirements.

When the second semester began, the professor – in some frustration – told the student to select his own due dates! "You know your schedule and its demands better than I do," the professor said. "You tell ME when you want to submit your three papers and your major project."

The student carefully reviewed his semester schedule and took into consideration his soccer practices, Homecoming festivities and the long-planned weekend wedding of his sister. He submitted the four self-imposed due dates to the professor. His papers and projects were all submitted on time.

The professor soon realized that this was a sound pedagogical practice for all his students. He announced to his classes that each student would be allowed to select his or her due dates...with the understanding that extensions or substitutions would not be allowed once those dates were submitted. Students designed their own due dates, considering their upcoming commitments in other classes, sports, etc. The instructor reported that he had one of his most successful and productive semesters ever! Papers were submitted on a staggered basis thereby preventing the dreaded "50 papers to correct" weekend. Further, there were no extensions requested, no "incompletes" were required...and his students gave him the most positive semester evaluations that he had ever received! Everybody wins!

The inclusion of students with learning disorders into regular college courses has created an observable increase in creative pedagogy in these classes. Professors find that it is no longer sufficient to be skilled and knowledgeable in their subject area. Now, they must also possess and practice sound, flexible and responsive teaching techniques.

A Lynn professor told me that, in order to assist his student who had special needs, he began posing his class notes on a website. Soon, all of his students were accessing them and were very grateful for this format. The grades and class performance of all his students improved markedly.

An increasing number of professors are subscribing to the concept of Universal Design created by the Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability at the University of Connecticut . The tenets of Universal Design include:

- Equitable use: making materials easier to understand and utilize
- Flexibility: permitting students to demonstrate their knowledge and skill in a variety of ways.
- Intuitive, simplified instruction
- Tolerance for error: understanding and accommodating for a variety of learning rates.
- Size and space considerations: adjusting the physical plant of the classroom to accommodate for the specific activity being conducted.
- Creating a community of learners: creation of an instructional environment that promotes communication and interaction among students and instructors.

I recall meeting a student on a college campus one day. He approached me to discuss the conundrum that he was facing. He was struggling in several of his classes and needed extra help from his instructors, but was embarrassed to approach them or enroll in the university's Learning Center . "I'm ashamed," he began, "I needed significant modifications and adjustments when I was in high school but, when I got to college, I wanted to make it on my own...with no help or exceptions. I feel as if I have failed."

I reminded him of three important and irrefutable facts:

1. He is entitled to receive these services under Federal Law. He is not requesting a handout...he's requesting a hand up!
2. His success in high school was a direct result of these accommodations...they should be viewed as permanent – not temporary – problems.
3. There is absolutely no need for the college student with learning disabilities to feel embarrassed or ashamed. In point of fact, he worked harder to have the opportunity to sit in that lecture hall seat than any other student in the class. This should be a source of great pride for him.

Let's work together to finally eliminate the damaging misconceptions about post secondary education for students with learning disorders. There IS a place for these students in our colleges and universities.

Don't believe me? Go to Boca Raton or Colorado Springs ! If I can't convince you...they will!

With every good wish, Rick Lavoie

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