

Introduction

What do you do to reduce student attrition when there is negligible funding and your faculty will permit neither remedial nor developmental coursework? This was the paradox created by the University of Missouri-Kansas City university-wide retention committee in 1972. The response initiated the program known as Supplemental Instruction, or SI. For those readers who are new to the SI program, SI is an academic assistance and enrichment program that targets traditionally difficult academic courses – those that have a high rate of D or F final course grades and withdrawals – and provides regularly scheduled, out-of-class, peer facilitated sessions. SI does not identify high-risk students, but rather identifies historically difficult courses. Through the use of carefully constructed learning communities, the SI model promotes higher academic achievement and persistence rates.

The development of SI was anything but a smooth road. Although members of the university-wide retention committee were keenly interested in improving student persistence, resources (as always) were scarce. Faculty members on the committee argued that any available funding should go directly into the departmental budgets, since the faculty were the ones who had regular, sustained contact with the students in the classrooms. Generally, faculty believed they were best equipped by training, by intellect, and by academic commitment to meet student needs. Administration countered by pointing out that giving departments funding for teaching improvements and tutoring had proved unproductive; attrition statistics remained appallingly high. The faculty parried by arguing that if administration would only recruit better students, the discussion would be moot. The committee's only area of agreement was on the need to evaluate rigorously any future effort to support student learning on the campus.

Deanna C. Martin proposed a plan that appealed to the UMKC retention committee on several grounds. First, SI as she proposed it could be evaluated in terms of reduced attrition and grade improvement in core curriculum courses. If the percentages of top grades rose in courses where SI was provided, and if D and F grades and Withdrawals fell, it might be reasonable to infer that SI had made a difference in an otherwise stable course. Secondly, the committee suggested controlling for several potentially confounding variables: motivation, professor, type of test, text, grading standards, and various academic and demographic factors. Thirdly, the committee wished to avoid an implication that student support was remedial. They recognized that SI would not be perceived in those ways if the SI program in each course began well before the first examination scores were recorded and if SI were open to all students in the class on a voluntary basis. Fourthly, faculty were attracted to SI because of the small fiscal commitment to the pilot program and because it required a minimum of faculty time. Finally, they liked the idea that SI would promote independent learning on the part of the students.

Following its adoption by the faculty in 1973, SI enjoyed more than a quarter century of

uninterrupted service to students and faculty. Faculty continue to support SI as they see that it improves student performance and, in addition, heightens student interest and involvement in classroom discussion.

Although SI had its pilot test in the health science schools of UMKC, the program was soon thereafter made available to undergraduate classes with an emphasis on the College of Arts and Sciences. Following a rigorous review process in 1981, the SI program became one of the few postsecondary programs designated by the U. S. Department of Education as "Exemplary Educational Program" and the first to be validated by the U.S.D.O.E. for having demonstrated effectiveness and for having the quality of being transferrable to other institutions. The National Diffusion Network, an agency of the U.S.D.O.E., provided funds for dissemination of SI for fifteen years. Now, national and international dissemination continue, supported by registration fees for training workshops and by institutional funds contributed by UMKC.

At the time of this writing, more than 2,000 faculty and staff from 1,000 institutions across the nation and 12 foreign nations have received training. At some institutions, SI is the only academic support service provided. Other institutions add SI to traditional developmental classes and individual tutoring. More than 450 references to SI and VSI appear in the professional literature, and in recent years the literature has become replete with successful models using some form of learning community as an essential element leading to greater mastery of rigorous course content material. Some of these articles and other educational resources are available for review through the Center for SI web site: <http://www.umkc.edu/cad/si/>

The SI model continues to evolve. While it was designed initially for academic support of students, the program has blossomed in new, unanticipated areas. In recent years the SI program has spread to more than a dozen countries outside the U.S. Many of these SI programs report the utility of SI for professional development of classroom professors. Professors who have requested feedback from the SI program report that they modify future lecture presentations based upon the anonymous comments of students provided by the SI leaders. Much of the published qualitative research concerning SI has been conducted in Australia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Some of these recent studies have focused on impact of the SI program with the personal and professional development of participating faculty members and SI leaders. With the advent of distance learning programs, there is an expectation of providing student services on-line. Some SI programs have been successfully experimenting with providing service through synchronous Internet chat-rooms and other web-based services. With the current focus on providing learning communities throughout higher education institutions, increased attention has been placed on SI programs as they complement and support student learning for a wider range of students in classes that may not be historically-difficult. Rather than only narrowly viewing the SI program as helping students to not get low

grades or withdraw from the course, now more educators see SI as an enrichment program for all students to help them more deeply master rigorous content material.

This theme issue highlights several significant innovations derived from the basic SI model as it is used with underprepared students. Part of the reason for the success of the SI model is that it continues to be contextualized to meet the specific needs of student groups and customized to meet the unique demands of different academic content areas. The SI model will continue to be effective for meeting students' needs as long as educators are guided by sound educational theory and conduct rigorous program evaluation leading to improved practice.

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