

Organization



Research brief prepared for AVID for Higher Education by Harriet Howell Custer, Ph.D.

Introduction

Students entering postsecondary institutions often find themselves in dramatically unfamiliar living, working and learning environments. They are exposed to many competing activities and responsibilities that must be prioritized—classes and homework, employment and social life, financial requirements and family obligations. Additionally, students must navigate among myriad programs and services as well as sometimes confusing academic and matriculation requirements. New college students—particularly first-generation college students—often have little experience in the cultural and academic environment in which they now find themselves. The development of organizational skills is essential because these students will need to make the most of their time as they adapt to their new surroundings. While adult learners may be somewhat more skilled in dealing with planning and priority setting, the new academic and social situation will also present significant challenges for students who are 24 and older, who are returning veterans, or who are returning to college after some time away from academia.

Organization is an essential part of WICOR (writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization and reading), AVID’s foundational curriculum framework. In its standards for high school seniors, AVID indicates that students who practice good organizational skills are better prepared for advanced level courses, participate more during instructional time, interact more constructively with instructors, effectively schedule time for homework, and manage their time through prioritizing and goal setting (AVID Elective Standards, Grade 12). At the college level, however, the need to develop significant organizational skills becomes even more critical: the college environment is more complex and demanding, and faculty and staff expect students to be independent, bringing all the necessary management skills with them. In addition to understanding and coping with the differences between high school and college, the most critical skills for new students include:

- management of their time and energy;
- organizing materials, information, ideas and assignments;
- managing resources for navigating the “hidden curriculum”; and
- planning effectively for academic assignments and projects while also setting long-term educational, employment and social goals.

Students can most effectively be introduced to and asked to apply each of these components of organization and career considerations during a first-year seminar, reinforced by the advising process. *AVID for Higher Education* provides a full curriculum for a first-year seminar course and many of the strategies and activities focus on areas such as time-management, study skills, goal setting and self management: all important attributes of well-organized students.

College “Shock”

Students who come to college directly from high school often have difficulties adjusting because they assume that their new academic environment won't be unlike their secondary experience. An initial key to success for this group is to understand how different “college” is, and to develop skills that will help them successfully maneuver within its parameters. In *College Knowledge* (2005), Conley argues that American education consists of two systems—secondary and postsecondary—that developed in isolation from each other with distinctly different goals and purposes. Most high school students, he found, view college “as some sort of extension of high school.” In his interviews of Harvard students, Light (2001) found that a significant source of trouble for many who struggle lies in the fact that they tend to continue to “organize their work in college the same way they did in high school.” Conley (2010) reported among his findings that major differences in high school and college courses are that college instructors:

- move at a more rapid pace,
- have different goals and higher expectations for student performance,
- expect students to produce work consistent with the requirements outlined in the course syllabus,
- expect more frequent writing assignments,
- expect students to work independently, ask for help when they need,
- tend to be intolerant of late work, poor excuses, or any form of academic dishonesty, and
- expect students to employ high levels of cognition and evidence-based support.

Overall, college faculty expect students to “take care of themselves in significant ways through independent action and self-initiative” (Conley, 2010). So, in addition to entering a social environment that is dramatically different from what they are used to, learners coming directly from high school are likely to be shocked at the academic rigor, the disciplined behaviors expected of them, and the complexity of their new environment. It all adds up, and pretty quickly, to a daunting mixture. The more complicated and demanding that world is, the higher the level of organization required to navigate it. Whether coming

directly from high school, transferring from another institution, returning to college, entering college after military service, or as a working adult, all students are likely to encounter a variety of obstacles.

AVID *for* Higher Education provides some techniques for students so they can break down their academic assignments and better manage complex academic tasks. These skills include analyzing prompts, determining the “point of confusion” regarding a task or assignment, establishing objectives, and effectively working within learning communities to economize their study time.

Management of Time and Resources

Light (2010) reports that one major source of academic trouble is poor management of time. Sophomore interviewees “who had a great first year” identified time allocation and time itself as a “scarce resource.” Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot & Associates (2006) state that students, for better or worse, “appear to set in place in their first semester the pattern of time allocation that will serve them across their years at college.” With these skills, students are able to construct an “architecture” of planning and organization strategies that will serve them throughout their lives. Unfortunately, too many students never learn how to manage time fully, and study time, for example, is seldom allocated properly.

While the organization of time and energy is undoubtedly fundamental, management of self is at least as important, for this ability underlies all successful endeavors. Closely related to the AVID program’s focus on “individual determination,” and supported by the emphasis of student development theories on self-efficacy, self-management may lie at the very heart of successful organization. Conley (2010) suggests that once self-efficacy increases, students are far more likely to assume responsibility for their own learning. One essential and related aspect of self-management is reflection, a “habit of mind” that AVID stresses as crucial to student success throughout its educational spectrum.

Organizing Materials, Information, Ideas and Assignments

College faculty have high expectations of students, assuming that they will function as independent learners, and be able to manage complex projects and assignments with a high level of critical thinking (Conley, 2010). Concurring with AVID’s philosophy of “rigor with support,” Tinto (2012) stresses the value of holding students to high expectations which, he says, are “a condition for student success,” whereas low expectations are a “recipe for failure.” Over time and with sufficient reinforcement and guidance, the skills, attitudes and behaviors that support these expectations become powerful organizational tools, including effective study practices; preparing for tests, exams and other assessments;

and managing large projects or papers that require critical thinking skills and supporting behaviors. AVID has long advocated the use of the Cornell note-taking system for students at any academic level. It is, in fact, one of the cornerstone AVID strategies and comprises a set of essential organizational tools. While there are a number of good methods for organizing and recording material from lectures, class discussions or readings, Cornell Notes provides a complete *system* that takes the student through the cycle of learning—questioning, summarizing, reflecting, reviewing, and assessing. Establishing the habit of regular review of notes from readings or lecture not only enhances memory, it also eliminates the tendency that many students have to “cram” before a test or exam.

Planning and Goal Setting for Projects, Major and Career

One of Stephen Covey’s (1989, 2004) “seven habits of highly effective people” is to *begin with the end in mind*. This concept provides a foundation for effective life planning and provides an important starting point for the student in establishing educational and career goals. One of the hallmarks of AVID’s system is helping students organize their academic lives through setting and managing goals—a skill set that’s critical at the college level. According to Cuseo, Fecas and Thompson (2010), over two-thirds of new students change their major during their first year of college. Prolonged indecisiveness can lead to serious problems in the second year. Research conducted by Hunter, Tobolowsky & Gardner (2010) tells us that many students struggle to identify a major, even during the latter part of their sophomore year when they need to have made a decision. In their second year, students may not be able to make decisions simply because they’re paralyzed by the number of choices available, suggesting that, as Lemons & Richmond (1987) state, identifying and developing a sense of purpose as a student may be a major developmental task. Once again, this underscores the need for students to learn to actively consider and apply their strengths, preferences, abilities, etc., to their learning throughout the first two college years with assistance from advisors and faculty members.

Part of the AVID *for Higher Education* set of services includes participation of mentors/tutors who assist students in determining their “point of confusion.” AVID tutors do not do tell students what is wrong with their work, but rather, use the Socratic method of instruction to help students figure out both what they don’t understand and also how they can use what they do know to solve their problem or confusion.

Faculty and Administrator Responsibilities

The ability to *organize*, in all its stages and forms—time management, management of ideas and assignments, using available resources, and career and life planning—is essential for the success of new college students. In this connection, Light (2001) cites an administrator who affirmed that the strategy at his college was to “admit a talented group

of students and then just ‘get out of their way.’” Light, however, insists that this should be the exception to the rule, and that colleges need to do just the opposite—“they should make a thoughtful evidence-based, purposeful effort to get *in* each student’s way in order “to help that young adult evaluate and re-evaluate his or her choices, always in the spirit of trying to do just a bit better next time.” All his research suggests strongly that when colleges are intentional about assisting students with developing their organizational and planning skills and abilities, they experience higher rates of student persistence, graduation and student satisfaction. AVID *for* Higher Education supports institutions with planning for and developing strong First-Year programs and extending supporting services through graduation. These services include far more than the First Year Seminar curriculum, but include other components that are proven student success strategies, such as advising, tutoring and learning communities.

References

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