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An Introduction to the Mission and Methodology of Academic Support

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Academic Support Programs (ASPs) "are an extremely hot issue" in legal education. Earlier this semester, the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) announced that it would fund annual academic support conferences for the next six years, and last fall, the LSAC published an updated handbook on ASPs. The Association of American Law Schools established a permanent section on academic support in 1998. A recent survey of 151 ABA-accredited law schools revealed that 137, or 90.7% of the schools surveyed, have an academic support program in one form or another. Within the past year, three Virginia law schools—the University of Richmond School of Law, Washington and Lee School of Law and Regent University School of Law—have created or revamped their ASPs. What’s all the fuss about?

Academic support has a long history in higher education. ASPs grew out of affirmative action policies beginning in the late 1960s. As universities sought to diversify their student bodies, they established ASPs to assist specially-admitted students. Law schools followed suit several years later. ASPs historically targeted minority students, and although ASPs still aim to ensure the success of diversity students, most programs now are open to a broader range of students.

There are as many models as examples of law school academic support programs. Goals and formats vary widely, and no two ASPs are identical. Some programs hope to increase retention. Others seek to enhance the performance of specially-admitted diversity students. Still others work towards an improved bar passage rate. As for specific program types, ASPs include summer orientation programs, individual tutoring, first-year skills classes, substantive review sessions, faculty-led study groups, upper-level legal reasoning courses, and bar exam preparation. But they say to write what you know, so this article focuses on two fairly common ASP components that are the centerpieces of the University of Richmond School of Law’s ASP, an academic skills class and a supplemental bar preparation course.

Despite differences in priorities, many academic support programs strive to improve students’ academic performance, during law school and on the bar exam. Those two goals complement each other well because of the thoroughly documented correlation between law school performance and first-time bar passage. Thus, the idea is to intervene early and assist students in improving their study skills and analytical skills during the first year. "An ounce of prevention . . ."

As part of that early intervention, most ASPs aim to help students become effective independent learners. Thus, we teach skills rather than tutor substance. But skills are better learned in context than in a vacuum, so we teach students those skills using examples from their concurrent substantive classes. We demonstrate reading and briefing cases using Garrett v. Dailey. We teach students how to “flowchart”

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goals; but we do work within the traditional law school pedagogy to help the effort to reach these goals. That's what all the fuss is about.

Paul T. Wangerin, A Little Assistance Regarding Academic Assistance Programs: An Introduction to Academic Assistance Programs, 21 J. Contemp. L. 169, 169 (1995) (book review). See also Law School Admission Council, A Practical Guide for Academic Assistance Programs 20 (Alex M. Johnson, Jr. et al. eds., 2000) (calling academic support "one of the most exciting areas in legal education today").

Law School Admission Council, supra note 1.

The AALS awarded permanent status to the section on academic support in April of 1998. The section had provisional status from 1995 until 1998.


The University of Virginia School of Law, the College William and Mary School of Law and George Mason University School of Law also report having academic support programs. Law School Admission Council, supra note 1, § III at 2-5.

See Paula Lustbader, From Dreams to Reality: The Emerging Role of Law School Academic Support Programs, 31 U.S.F.L. Rev. 839, 842 (noting that "with the increasing need for law schools to diversify their student body, came a concomitant duty to provide assistance for those students").

The terms "minority" and "diversity" are not synonymous. Generally law schools admit some non-minority students because of their nontraditional backgrounds (e.g. first in family to attend college), and many minority students are admitted without regard to race. See Kristine S. Knaplund & Richard H. Sander, The Art and Science of Academic Support, 45 J. Legal Educ. 157, 160 (1995).

Law School Admission Council, supra note 1, at 19.

Under the American Bar Association rules, law schools cannot give students credit towards graduation for bar exam preparation courses.

See, e.g., Knaplund & Sander, supra note 7, at 201.

279 P.2d 1091 (Wash. 1955).

I do not mean to suggest that failing the bar exam once is "too late." Certainly, many lawyers who pass the bar exam on a second or subsequent attempts have successful and productive careers. Nevertheless, repeating the bar exam extracts a high toll, financially and in terms of self-esteem. See, e.g., Richard Cabrera, Essay: Working to Improve: A Plan of Action for Improving the Bar Exam Pass Rate, 27 Wm. Mitchell L. Rev. 1169, 1170-71 (2000).

At the 1999 AALS meeting, the section on Academic Support program was entitled "Developing Strategies and Programs for Maximum Bar Performance: The Ultimate Team Challenge."

Ruta K. Stroup, Mend It, Bend It, and Extend It: The Fate of Traditional Law School Methodology in the 21st Century, 27 Loy. U. Chi. L.J. 449, 486 (1996) ("The primary mission of ASps is to help students to help themselves.").

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changing society, in which the rule of law will be preserved, and the rights and liberties guaranteed by the United States and Virginia Constitutions will continue to be protected.

Attaining the mission is critical to the future of our courts and our system of justice. Our judicial system must continue to be impartial in its judgments, casting aside political affiliations or political influence to insure that the rule of law is followed. There is no question that we, the guardians of our legal system, can meet the changes if our courts are staffed by competent judges, able lawyers, and effective court personnel who, together, can insure that the goals and missions of the plan will be fulfilled.†