

# Report on the Bepko Learning Center Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

Assessment Visit Thursday and Friday April 7 and 8, 2005

## Assessment Team

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## Introduction

The assessment team spent two days meeting with ten different constituent groups that have various levels of interaction and responsibility for the Bepko Learning Center. The team also reviewed the Bepko Learning Center's Self Study Report.

The overall findings of the visit are that the Bepko Learning Center has done an outstanding job given severely limited human resources. The Center is an excellent example of how students (mentors) can be trained and facilitated to play important and effective roles in assisting fellow students in their academic development. The teamwork and mutual support that was present in the University College where the Bepko Learning Center is housed is to be highly applauded and clearly contributes to the success of the Center. As Chair of the assessment team I want to express my thanks and that of my colleagues to those who planned the visit and made the use of our time effective and worthwhile.

The report will be divided in to two parts. Part One will include the strengths of the Bepko Learning Center. Part Two recommendation for improvements that will include additional assessment activities and resources needed for improvements.

## **Part One: Strengths of the Bepko Learning Center**

The Visiting Team would like to begin this report by acknowledging the many significant and important strengths of the Bepko Learning Center. Although there are improvements that can be made, the BLC is an important resource for students, and it has made great progress and had significant effect on the entering student population at IUPUI.

### **Organization**

The structure of University College with its many related activities and its location in the center of campus serves the targeted student population very well. It is also important that a student food service is housed within it. The food service attracts students who are then also able to find the academic support services available in the building. For an entering student population with a high number of first generation, college students, ease of use and access is a key attribute. IUPUI's decision to create University College as a visible entity which houses multiple support services for entering students, particularly those who are undeclared, was an important dedication of resources for the institution and has had a positive impact on student success and on IUPUI's national standing.

### **Leadership**

One of the most important strengths of the BLC is its Director. With the limited resources available, Mark has done a wonderful job with the Center. His ability to do a lot with a little is quite remarkable. His ability to build relationships and to use resources effectively is an important asset for the BLC. However, to move to the next level, Mark needs additional professional support personnel and strong faculty partners. (See recommendations.)

The upper administration in University College, Scott Evenbeck, Barbara Jackson and Gayle Williams, and their close collaboration with Mark Minglin, along with other UC administrative personnel, is one of the strengths of the BLC. The dedication to and knowledge of the needs of entering students that the administrators have is a key aspect of the success of UC and of the BLC. Without leadership, understanding and support from the administration, the best efforts can fail.

### **Mentors**

The student mentors we met were remarkable individuals. They were committed, thoughtful and inspiring students who clearly, most often, have a very positive influence on the students they mentor. There are two areas that could benefit from additional thought, the mentor selection process and the mentor training. These two areas will be addressed in the recommendations section below. In addition, we understand the use of students as Resource Mentors is a function of resources, but we believe that it may be necessary to move to a professional staff in these critical positions. There may be too much reliance on students for the oversight, communication with students and faculty and

training of the mentors of the program. The constant change at this level of the program is one area of strain in this ambitious program.

## **Process**

The thought that has gone into the day to day activity and oversight of the BLC is commendable. The number and detail of reports and the access to them online is a strength of the program. The data compiled from the mentor session planning forms, weekly activity reports and mentor observations could be used more effectively and made more readily available to those in the program. It would benefit the mentor community to have lesson plans and activities that have been particularly successful easily accessible for use in other mentor sessions.

## **Technology**

The availability and use of technology is certainly a strength of the BLC. The technology use in the classrooms, the laptop check out system and the new SMART boards are all evidence of the importance and effective use of technology in the program. (As an aside, there is less costly smart board-like equipment available through Hitachi that BLC might look into if there is a decision to increase the use of that type of technology.)

## **Assessment**

The BLC has paid significant attention to the need for assessment. It has worked well with the UC Assessment personnel to think about and design a plan for assessing the services of the Center. The multiple measures including both quantitative and qualitative data create a broad assessment plan. It is, however, important to think closely about what the data can tell us. The data for SI is somewhat uneven, and it is not clear which students are taking advantage of the sessions. Are the students who need additional support attending or are those already well prepared and motivated using the support to improve their already strong scores?

## **Part Two Recommendation for Improvement**

### **Recommendation One**

The team agreed unanimously that Center needs to define very clearly what it will use as measures of success and that those measures **should not include** improved graduation rates or improved retention rates. These two institutional measures of success are the responsibility of all members of a university community, including students and their families. No single unit, no matter how significant its contribution, can be held accountable for these outcomes.

The use of improved DWF rates as a measure of success by the Center should only be used under two conditions. First, the individual academic support service SLA or SI must have the commitment of the faculty teaching the course and both must work actively together as a team in providing the support service. Second, appropriate assessment measures must be devised to demonstrate the effectiveness of the academic support service at enhancing learning and improving pass rates.

### **Recommendation Two**

That the Center's director work to develop professional relationships with interested faculty in all departments that offer gateway courses as a way to find support for the use of academic support services. The team sees having a faculty member who is involved with the training of mentors, especially in training them how to facilitate the learning processes of the specific content area (i.e. how to learn chemistry) as a vital key to the success of the support service. Faculty should be involved not only with the training but the planning of mentors' sessions, especially reviewing mentors' lesson plans. Faculty need to take ownership in activities that will benefit their students.

Ideas for developing these relationships include offering fellowships to faculty to work with mentors and with the center's director to develop appropriate academic support activities for their students. These fellowships could have two parts: initially, half-time support for developing students' learning goals and mentor's specific activities, and subsequently, quarter-time support for maintaining the developed activities. These fellowships can have monetary benefit as well as recognition for this work. It appeared to the team that seeking out faculty with lecturer status may be the best first step to building these department relationships.

A second idea is that the centers' director consider using one of the two new positions that will become available to hire a senior level person who may already have contacts and connections with faculty and who has the respect of the faculty. Perhaps, a recently retired faculty member or senior staff member who has an interest in teaching and learning activities would be a good match.

The third suggestion is that members of the UC faculty group be asked to help facilitate the development of these faculty connections in the departments and help the director to make contacts with interested faculty. This could include facilitating connections with department chairs and soliciting their support.

A fourth suggestion is to hold a joint retreat sponsored by the Bepko Center and the Center for Teaching and Learning for faculty interested in becoming more involved with using academic support services with their gateway courses. The retreat could offer the Center the opportunity to explain the benefits of the program, to stress the use of active learning activities in student learning, and to show faculty how to teach mentors to work with their students.

### **Recommendation Three**

There was universal agreement from everyone the team spoke with that space is an enormous problem preventing the expansion of academic support services. The team recommends that until that problem can be addressed the Bepko Center focus on using its most effective support programs which clearly appear to be SLA and the model developed for chemistry, PLTL. In our conversations with faculty and mentors, there was very little support for the SI activities. The most common comment was that few if any students attend sessions with enough regularity for the service to be of benefit. This was the experience at Ferris State with SI that led to the development of SLA.

If the opportunity comes to replace furniture in the current space, the team recommends that lightweight easily movable tables and comfortable chairs be purchased. This will give a mentor or faculty members the flexibility to create a learning environment that fits their teaching/facilitating practice.

### **Recommendation Four**

The team was very impressed with the mentors to whom we spoke, especially their professionalism, level of commitment and enthusiasm for their work. We believe the Center should use the development of the leadership skills and service work of these mentors as one way of demonstrating the successful impact of the Center on students at IUPUI. We recommend that the Center track mentors graduation rates, GPA's, awards and later successes as alumni and use this information as a recruitment tool for new mentors and as demonstration of the high quality of training and development that the Center offers students.

### **Recommendation Five**

The Center should explore the possibility of using students from the teacher education programs at IUPUI as mentors. This could be a win-win situation for both the Center and the College of Education.

### **Recommendation Six**

From the discussions the team had with the mentor coordinators it was clear that there were some gaps in their training and preparation for their work. It appears many of the gaps will be filled by the new course UC 201 being developed as a training tool for mentors.

Coordinators reported that not all students received diversity training; many students were not comfortable with how to develop active learning activities; and how to engage students in the academic support services and mentors needed assistance in understanding and facilitating, content specific, "how to learn" skills. In regards to the

latter, how to help a student to learn psychology is different than helping them to learn physics. This training in “content” skills will have to come from the academic departments, as mentioned in recommendation two.

Mentors also need training in how to develop and write learning outcomes for their sessions. These outcomes will clearly define what it is that the mentor wants the students to learn in the session and provide a basis for measuring whether or not this learning occurred. This should help in focusing the mentors more clearly on what it is they want to happen in their sessions.

Learning outcomes drive all other teaching decisions, what methods to choose, what activities to include and what evaluation tools to use. Developing these learning outcomes will form the basis for an overall philosophy or pedagogy of learning in the specific disciplines served by the BLC. Forming these outcomes and the objectives to implement them along with the evaluation of the mentors’ teaching/learning strategies will significantly upgrade the overall assessment of the Bepko Center.

## **Recommendation Seven**

The team felt strongly that the IUPUI administration should be asked to recognize the outstanding efforts of the mentors. Through simple actions, like letters, deans or the Chancellor should acknowledge mentors’ contributions to students’ learning, their outstanding academic and leadership accomplishments and service to the university. Students can put these notes into their portfolio; and these visible recognitions will add strength to the recruitment of future mentors and the persistence of current mentors.

## **Recommendation Eight**

The team believes the Bepko Center should carefully review the value and impact the SI program is having on the academic success of students. This was mentioned in recommendation three but given the student population enrolling in gateway classes and their need for a more required and structured academic support intervention, we feel strongly that the resources of dollars, time and space should not be allocated to SI.

Supplemental instruction is an optional support program that works the best for above average motivated students who are in different courses, e.g. premed students taking anatomy. Traditional aged, first year students may often lack the metacognitive skills needed to recognize they need help in learning their content material. They come from a fairly structured environment of high school and the transition to college with its freedoms often contributes to academic difficulty. Francis Ianni in the *Search for Structure* called for higher education to build bridges from high school to college for first year students that provide them the transition experiences needed to make the adjustment to college life. SI programs often lack this kind of transitional structure.

## **Recommendation Nine**

The assessment surveys for both SI and SLA are not designed to measure student learning, and this is the crucial issue. As research shows us, grades, or even attendance by itself, are not the best measure of student learning. In addition, if the data could be teased apart, a clearer picture might be evident. As a means for improving the assessment, the BLC might create an Assessment Committee to look at the current

instruments in light of others used across the country. Making use of the new electronic student portfolio for assessment might be also be considered.

The movement of IUPUI to student learning outcomes will assist in the assessment of the BLC services as well. In addition to the current “satisfaction of service” questions for students’, assessment questions should also focus on learning how to learn, study skills (e.g. better test taker, better note taker, better able to find important information in a textbook), and the amount of new learning that took place.

Sample Questions might be:

In these sessions, I am learning the material.

In these sessions, I am developing my writing skills.

In these sessions, I am improving my ability to think critically.

I have learned to become a better note-taker/test taker/organizer of information

The class sessions stimulate my interest in the subject

The class sessions help me to do better on the exams

The class sessions help me to better understand difficult concepts.

These kinds of assessment questions go the heart of the academic support service—does it improve student learning.

## **Recommendation Ten**

The BLC may want to work with the psychology department to develop new tools for interviewing and hiring mentors that have the kinds of skills and abilities needed to deliver academic support services. Tools that may address personality, leadership and desire to perform service could be helpful in finding the best mentors. The Center could use psychology majors who are mentors to devise and evaluate the best “I/O” practices for hiring and training mentors. The Center might also look to other institutions for their best ideas for recruiting and hiring mentors, including Portland State. In addition, qualitative interviews with mentors who leave the program may shed some light on improving the hiring and training practices as well.

## **Recommendation Eleven**

The team believes that the Center would benefit from a more developed marketing plan. The Center needs more visibility. It needs to develop ways to make faculty and students consistently aware of their services. Students and faculty are so very busy that they could easily ignore an occasional message or letter. A marketing plan that features ongoing announcements about the services in a wide variety of forms may be needed to get through the “busy barrier”. This plan could be developed by students in IUPUI’s marketing degree program, perhaps even by current mentors with a marketing or related major.

## **Recommendation Twelve**

The team understands that there has been some difficulty with senior level mentors and there is discussion on limiting the “life span” of a mentor to sophomore and junior years. The team suggests that this not be a blanket requirement. Given how

heavily the Center relies on student mentors to deliver its services, the life of the Center depends on well trained mentors who are caring and capable. A case by case assessment might lead to a better use of resources, at least until the professional staff of the Center grows to the point where continuity in the year to year delivery of the support services is unaffected by the loss of some of the best mentors. Current problems with advanced mentors may indicate a programmatic change. Mentors may need more challenging learning opportunities. The influx of more faculty into the program may provide the necessary challenge and learning.

### **Recommendation Thirteen**

Given the very limited professional personnel of the Center, it is strongly recommended that the Center focus its efforts on those support services that are having the greatest impact on students' academic success. The Center should put its money, time and personnel to work with departments that are willing to work with them to serve their students' best interest. The Center should delay expansion of current programs or adding new programs unless they are cutting old programs or receive additional personnel resources. It is clear the director is doing 110% right now; there is no good to come from thinking he can do 125%.

### **Recommendation Fourteen**

Although the team is very strongly in favor of ongoing training for mentors and planning meetings for mentors, the Center director needs to monitor the effectiveness of these sessions. Meeting without a specific, planned agenda is counter-productive. Resource mentors mentioned that this was the case with some of their weekly meetings.

### **Recommendation Fifteen**

An issue surfaced during the visit about decision-making with regard to technology. Faculty and mentors did not seem to be part of the decision-making that resulted in the choice of SMARTHINKING, or even the use of SMART boards, and those decisions did not seem to be visible to that population, particularly the faculty. Given that students do not seem to be using SMARTHINKING in significant numbers, faculty and mentors might have been able to choose technology resources in a better way had they been involved. Now, they should be brought into the discussion on how to better use and increase access to that resource and should be part of the process in determining future technological directions.

## **Conclusion**

The team was extremely impressed with the work the Center Director Mark Minglin, especially given the limited resources available to the Center. The mentor program is to be admired as an excellent model of student leadership development and human resource application for the good of the institution. What Mark has done with only students to work with is just amazing.

Given the demographics of IUPUI's students and its current retention rate and graduation rate, the team feels very strongly that significant human and dollar resources need to be put into an expansion of academic support services and the Bepko Center in particular, as one part of a plan to improve retention and graduation rates of students. IUPUI should recognize that using students, even bright and energetic students, is not a magic formula for success. Just like all teachers, they need guidance and training to handle the routine and difficult learning situations that always arise in a learning environment. More professional staff are necessary to provide adequate training in teaching and to mentor these talented students. The Bepko Learning Center has one, full-time, permanent staff person who is involved in the operation of the Center on a daily basis and he has a myriad of administrative tasks. The currently "good" Center can be multiplicatively developed by the addition of another permanent professional staff member who also has a good grasp of the teaching agenda in gateway courses.

Faculty will need to be involved in these academic support services if the services are to have the necessary impact to improve the rate of students' success. The research literature is quite clear that support services delivered in direct relationship to a content courses, ( SLA, or PLTL model used in chemistry) are significantly more effective than those done in isolation from the course (tutoring). To use a system that connects to the courses the cooperation of faculty is absolutely necessary.

We wish Mark and his talented mentors the best of luck as they move forward to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by entering students at IUPUI.