

## Communicate sources of support for learning

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Studies demonstrate that academic support structures can have a significant impact on student learning, performance, and feelings of academic belonging.<sup>30</sup> Students who participate in academic support programs typically increase their academic performance as well as their confidence. These students seek support when faced with course or academic challenges; many students also seek support to hone academic skills, such as study practices and test-taking strategies. Whether used for proactive or reactive reasons, support resources can complement students' in-class learning experiences—often helping students achieve their full academic potential.

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*“For me, it was not really understanding the full resources that I was supposed to use. For example, I didn’t really understand what office hours were, not realizing that you don’t necessarily have to have a specific question. Not having family who knew about the American college system . . . put me at a disadvantage.”*

(Women Focus Group, Northwestern Black Student Experience Report)

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Support for learning refers to academic services, programs, and resources available to students to enhance their academic experience. These supports can help students as they transition from a different learning environment (e.g., high school or previous institution) to a university. They can also help students develop critical skills to meet expectations of academic rigor and to balance daily course requirements with heavier course projects and assignments. Examples of external sources of support for learning are office hours, academic advising, academic learning and resource centers, tutoring services, libraries, and writing centers.<sup>31</sup> While new instructors often learn about academic support and resources on campus during their orientation, it is important that all instructors actively familiarize themselves with the resources available to students and promote sources of support.

However, as Anthony Abraham Jack, author of *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, describes, “not all students have had a chance to learn how to navigate mainstream institutions like colleges before they actually enter them, and colleges should not assume that they have.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed,

academic skills and strategies vary among students. Importantly, instructors often play a key role in guiding students toward sources of support for their academic progress. As such, inclusive instructors promote available support services within the University.

Scholars have demonstrated the importance and positive impact of instructor-student relationships on the academic success of students.<sup>33</sup> Inclusive instructors recognize their role as institutional agents of support for students both inside and outside the classroom. Students greatly benefit from instructor check-ins, whereby instructors gauge students' comprehension of course materials and their assessment preparedness. As Lundberg and colleagues demonstrate, when students perceive instructors as “available, helpful, and sympathetic, they [report] greater gains in learning.”<sup>34</sup> In addition to communicating course standards and expectations, inclusive instructors communicate sources of support that students can use to meet instructors' standards and expectations. In their 2017 study on low-income, first-generation undergraduate students, Means and Pyne found that, for “students struggling with challenging course styles and material, a supportive faculty member proved to be pivotal.” Among other things, these faculty provided “regular outreach to students through office hours as well as other kinds of contact.”<sup>35</sup>

An inclusive learning environment eliminates the barrier of students' having to request information about academic support. Instead, instructors actively communicate information to students in a clear and open manner. In communicating sources of support, instructors also promote student self-advocacy. While some students arrive at the University with fine-tuned support-seeking practices, other students may hesitate to seek support or may not be aware of available resources. Some students may think that seeking help is a sign of weakness or a lack of competence that they do not want visible to instructors or their peers.<sup>36</sup> Inclusive instructors normalize and promote such practices to help students build self-advocacy skills and learn that academic support can be a core element of effective learning, rather than a sign of deficit.

We should also remember that students often turn to their peers for academic support. Informal peer tutoring and study groups are great examples of student-to-student academic support to encourage.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

1. **Learn about academic support and resources.** Inquire about department, school, and university resources. Familiarize yourself with the University's sources of support for learning, including your school's academic advising resources. Engage in educational opportunities (e.g., a consultation with **Academic Support and Learning Advancement**) to learn about student resources at Northwestern. For example, in the 2016 **Northwestern University Black Student Experience Report**, the library was reported to be one of the places where students felt most comfortable and experienced the lowest levels of discrimination on campus.
2. **Identify and make connections with course- and discipline-relevant resources.** From connecting with subject librarians to working with tutors in academic support programs, instructors can benefit from identifying resources that can directly support students with course projects and assignments.
3. **Include a statement in the course syllabus about external sources of academic support.** A clear and inclusive statement encouraging support-seeking practices can prompt students to take advantage of academic resources. Academic Support and Learning Advancement has a sample syllabus statement for instructors.
4. **Emphasize the purpose and importance of office hours.** On the first day of class, communicate your office hours and clearly describe their purpose. Regularly encourage students to attend office hours, whether or not they have specific questions regarding course content.
5. **Direct students to campus resources for support.** Remind students about campus resources when introducing a course assessment. For example, encourage students to take advantage of writing support for written assessments. When providing feedback to students, include resources that can help students improve their skills, practices, and strategies. Students can locate resources through the **Academic Resource Directory**. Share examples from students who successfully utilized academic support resources.
6. **Incorporate resources in course assessments or activities.** Require that students seek support at campus resources (e.g., the **Writing Place**). The requirement can help students recognize the potential benefit of support resources.
7. **Invite representatives from campus resources to the classroom.** Alternatively, instructors can hold class sessions in an academic resource center (e.g., a library).

## EXAMPLE

Students in a research seminar are required to complete an archival project for their final course assessment. The instructor wants students to have the support they need to learn and successfully complete this assignment, so she helps them make connections across campus to assist with their research and writing endeavors. The instructor knows how important it is for all students to know and use academic support resources on campus, and therefore includes a statement about these resources on the course syllabus. She makes clear that using these resources is standard practice for effective learning and not something only for students who need help. She also includes links to the Writing Place on the course's Canvas site and reminds students to take advantage of writing consultations offered there. In addition, she requires that students discuss their project outlines with experienced graduate students at the **History Writing Center**. To encourage students to make connections with academic support resources, she collaborates with the librarians at McCormick Library of Special Collections and University Archives. Students attend an interactive instruction session on how to use the library's materials.

## FURTHER READING

Azpeitia, J., Meza Lazaro, Y., Ruvalcaba, S. A., & Bacio, G. A. (2023). "It's easy to feel alone, but when you have community, it makes [college] a lot easier": First-generation students' academic and psychosocial adjustment over the first year of college. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 07435584231170040.

Thompson, B. (2008). "How college freshmen communicate student academic support: A grounded theory study." *Communication Education*, 57(1), 123-144.