

Building up a Learning Community: The Academic Support Program

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the Academic Support Program which aims to cultivate a sustainable academic culture among students at Sabancı University. The program forms a bridge between quality of the teaching process and the learning outcomes and is implemented as a part of an autonomous student support system. The system is called the Center for Individual and Academic Development. Our program and the system differ considerably from existing student support systems at other universities. The Academic Support Program is unique in terms of its aim, structure and modes of function. The Program focuses on the principle of “**learning to learn**” and based on various “**active learning**” methods. Student involvement is emphasized by engaging them in management of the program. The paper includes the landmarks of the model, the qualitative and quantitative analysis.

**Key words:** Learning support, learner communities, peer support, higher education,

## **1. Academic Support Program and Center for Individual and Academic Development**

Learning is under the influence of individual and external factors. Students face several transition periods in their university education. Besides determining their future careers, they have to develop their individual and academic skills. Providing support to students in their learning has a significant role in enhancing their achievement and progress (Blytham & Orr, 2002). Moreover, freshman year has particular importance as it is a period of passing from adolescent to being young adult and calls for adaptation to the university environment. In some countries and in particular in Turkey, the fierce competition in enrolling at a university affects their school education and also the individual. Effects such as inadequacy in inquisitiveness and critical thinking, adverse learning habits can be observed. These leave students to cope with lack of motivation and low self esteem (Arıkan, 1998).

Observing the problem caused Sabancı University to establish a student support unit, composed of varied and intertwined facilities, namely the Center for Individual and Academic Development. The programs are offered in five main streams: Academic support, advising and monitoring, psychological counseling, writing support and disabled student support. The foremost activities of the Center are:

1. Academic Support Program
2. Academic Success Monitoring and Counseling Program
3. Tutoring System
4. Peer Tutoring System
5. Individual Counseling Center
6. Foundations Development Year Counseling Program
7. Writing Center
8. Course Evaluations System
9. Support Unit for Student with Disabilities
10. “Let’s talk about teaching” seminar series
11. “Personal Development” seminars and workshops
12. Projects

- i. Learning outcomes
- ii. Attendance

The Academic Support Program is an integral part of this wider support system. The Academic Support Program is devoted to cultivating a learning culture that fosters creativity which is constructed and perpetuated by students. This aim makes the program distinct among learning centers that are mainly concentrated on the comprehension of particular subject matters.

The specific objectives to reach the main goal can be summarized as to:

- encourage students to benefit fully from the University environment and acquire knowledge from reliable sources.
- Organize settings that foster creativity and culture, generating “genuine” knowledge.
- facilitate the development of crucial student-related and individual learning skills and promote student ability to study efficiently.
- create an atmosphere which assists students realize and develop their potential as well as utilize their talents in conjunction with their newly acquired skills.
- support students during the period of adaptation to the university environment.
- help individual learners define their personal goals, and select the course which best serves their needs.
- provide services to enhance the academic achievement of students with diverse interests and knowledge bases. Support the students who have inadequate knowledge basis to provide equal opportunity in the assessment of their class work.
- organize activities promoting student academic knowledge and awareness in contemporary local and global subjects.

The implementation of these objectives necessitates careful structuring. This is essentially by building a suitable learning environment and by implementing the program in a wider setting that allows intervention among programs. Leveraging students learning outside the class room remarkably also enhance quality of teaching and has a positive impact on the learning outcomes.

Both the Center and the Program provides feedback to other units and faculty members.

Students benefit from the Center for Individual and Academic Development on voluntary basis and the Center on the average reaches 52 % of the student population. The number of offered activities, service hours and participation rates remain consistent over years. A sample summary of 2008 Spring Semester’s activity figures/hours, total attendance and number of personnel including teaching assistance [TA] and undergraduates [UG] involved are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**

2008 Spring	Tutorials, Groups & Workshops	Total Attendance	Tutorials, Groups & Workshops (hour/week)	Number of Instructors/Counselors/ Teaching Assistants and Undergraduates
Academic Support Program	2038	2836	120	2 + 4.5 [TA] + 42 [UG]
Writing Center	776	1504	71	5 + 2 [TA] + 4 [UG]
Individual Counseling Center	1265	427	74	3.1

## **2. Landmarks of the Academic Support Program**

The program can be viewed as a socially situated activity system and it is possible to explain its function conceptualizing it within the framework of activity theory based on Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology (Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978 and Engeström, 1987). Taking peer influence and the effectiveness of peer instruction into account, the program captures the basis for various 'active learning' methods (Topping, 1996). The structure and functioning of the program are distinctively centralized around and structured by the principle of 'learning to learn'.

The design of the program is unique in terms of its administrative and organizational structure. Aiming to enable internalization of the culture of learning and sustaining a healthy academic environment, the unit offers programs with active participation of students and exclusively assigns responsibility to students in the unit's administrative organs.

The program offers neither compact knowledge nor tutorials, which would undermine existing course aims. The main instrument of the Program is Peer Study and Discussion Sessions held in a controlled environment. That is to point out the Program is not a substitute for, or an alternative to any portion of the content of existing courses offered by the University.

The program is subject to systematic evaluation and analysis for perfection as well as the attainment of dynamism, enabling its adaptation to the University's strategic planning. Continuous follow-up of events, comparative analysis of participants' academic achievement, and questionnaire based opinion pool formations are integrated parts of the programs.

Program's student administrative bodies that cherish academic integrity and ethical values have a positive influence over participants and over the university's social climate.

### **3. Academic Support Programs**

Activities are held in a controlled environment and under professional supervision. In moderation, supervision and control undergraduates take the main responsibility. Facilities remain open for 24 hours daily, including holidays.

The main program activities are as follows.

Peer Study/Discussion Sessions [PSDS]:

These sessions form the core of the Academic Support Program and also are the most effective applications of the principles that are “active learning”, “active participations”, “learning to learn”, “peer support” and “learning-by-living”. There are 4 types of Peer Study/Discussion Sessions: Active Learning Sessions, Individual Tutorials, Senior Tutorials and Workshops.

Peer Study and Discussion Sessions are designed to allow students to enhance effective learning habits, increase the efficiency of their learning, use their individual talents by realizing their potential, and internalize these new skills through peer interactions. Peer study and discussion groups are guided by a student called the “peer moderator” who is in most cases at same level with the group. Participants cannot receive the first hand knowledge from the moderators; instead they are encouraged to learn by criticizing and by being active participants in the discussions. At Individual Tutorials and Senior Tutorials, the participants receive closer attention according to their needs, till they felt confident to join an Active Learning Session.

The program also offers seminars and workshops in order to introduce to student community the contemporary areas of research and the academic programs of Sabanci University. These are designed to have an interactive nature, which gives the students a chance to see possible research areas through the eyes of their peers and encourages them to learn through their experiences. Hosted and guided by Academic Support, juniors and seniors assist their friends in clarifying their academic goals by providing information and sharing their own knowledge and experience. Promoting inquisitiveness, critical thinking, and enthusiasm for doing research also stand out as the main goals of these presentations.

In addition to the activities described there are remedial and adjunct courses offered by the program.

To realize the offered activities the program offers several in service training.

The activities are condensed in the evenings during the free student hours. Study rooms and main facilities are open 24 hours daily, including holidays.

### **4. Some Activity Figures for Peer Study Discussion Sessions and Assessment**

Following figures in Table 2 are included to show the consistency in participation rate of Active Learning Peer Study Discussion Sessions [PSDS] and Workshops which are adjunct to these sessions [WPSDS]. Academic success is a broad concept that includes many and varied factors like conceptual understanding, knowledge

accumulation, persistence in academic discourse and social compatibility. There are numerous ways to measure academic success. To use the grades obtained from courses as success indicator is not a rare practice. Here for sake of simplicity and clarity having a passing grade from a course is used as an indicator to find success rates. The success rates of participants of [PSDS] as obtaining a passing grade from the subject are provided in the Table 3. In Table 2 and 3, the rates are calculated by counting each student only once regardless of the hours spent for studying.

**Table 2**

[PSDS]	2006-2007 Spring	2007-2008 Fall	2007-2008 Spring	2008-2009 Fall
Number of Sessions	413	516	554	433
Number of Hours	890	1085,5	854,5	1072,5
Number of Participants	429	508	512	536
[WPSDS]				
Number of Workshops	11	12	11	15
Attendance	344	338	334	582
Participation Rate	<b><u>0.447</u></b>	<b><u>0.559</u></b>	<b><u>0.437</u></b>	<b><u>0.401</u></b>

**Table 3 [PSDS] Participation and Success Rates**

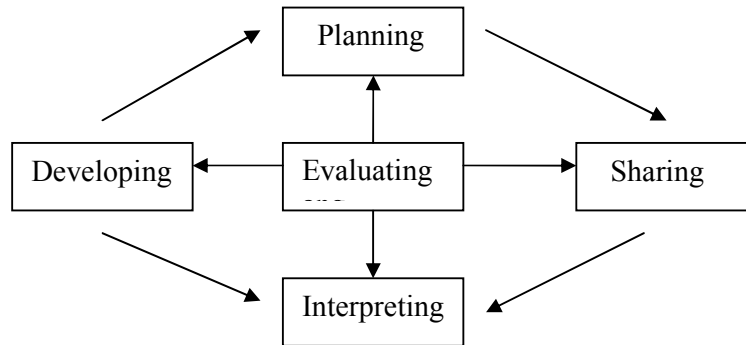
[PSDS] Subject	Academic Term	2006-07 Fall	2006-07 Spring	2007-08 Fall	2007-08 Spring	2008-09 Fall
Mathematics	Participation Rate	41.32 %	47.87 %	44.21 %	42.08 %	35.15 %
	Success Rate: Pass. Rate among Participants	84.90 %	89.88 %	91.72 %	90.00 %	90.06 %
Science Physics, Chemistry and Biology	Participation Rate	39.16 %	37.18 %	44.14 %	44.85 %	30.65%
	Success Rate: Pass. Rate among Participants	97.31 %	84.24 %	93.36 %	92.62 %	93.42 %
Social and Political Sciences	Participation Rate	-	08.91 %	14.71 %	09.45 %	11.64 %
	Success Rate: Pass. Rate among Participants	-	-	95.00 %	92.31%	87.50 %

High participation and success rates, and questionnaire results, reveal student satisfaction consistently over years.

The sharing dynamics and meta-cognitive skills in Peer Study and Discussion Sessions are explained in Diagram 1.

In addition, subject base and theoretical analysis of Peer Study and Discussion Sessions show their impact on students' permanent and meaningful study skills (Arikan & Gogus, 2008, 2009).

**Diagram 1** (Arikan & Gogus, 2008)



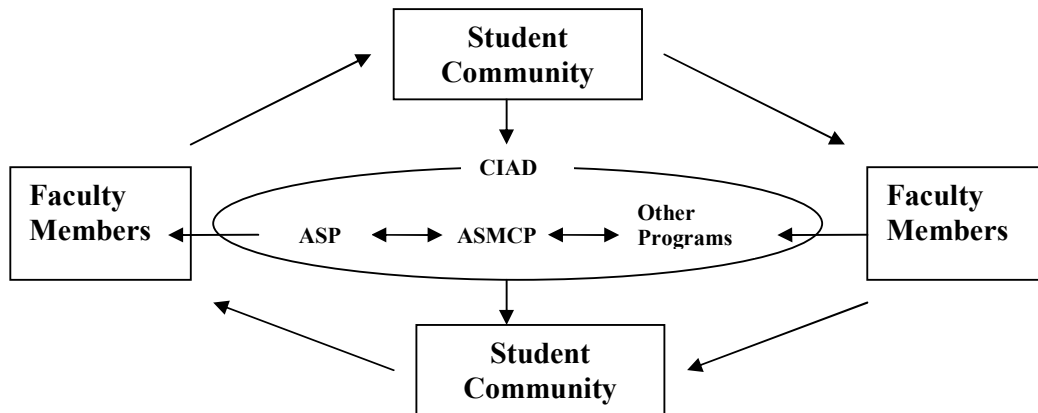
Obtained research results show the program's significant impact on student academic accomplishment and on the development of a sustainable learning community.

### **5. Underlying Factors of Achievement: The Bigger Picture**

The achievement of the model attributes to external and internal factors. There are three prime external factors. Firstly, the administrative structure of the university and the position of the Center in this scheme. The Center for Individual and Academic Development is an independent unit and directly accountable to the presidents office, making it autonomous. Second factor is the administration of the Center itself. The Center is administered by an Executive Committee which consists of representatives from each faculty, student resources and from the Center. This feature helps in capturing the big picture and utilizing the resources more efficiently. Thirdly, utilization of various support components via interaction and cooperation increase the efficiency and effectiveness.

The external factors of achievement and inside dynamics of the Center can be summarized by Diagram 2, where arrows show the direction of information flow as input and output.

**Diagram 2**



**CIAD:** Center for Academic and Individual Development  
**ASMCP:** Academic Success Monitoring and Counseling Program  
**ASP:** Academic Support Program

Internal factors of achievement are attributed to the structure and, the focus and implementation of the program. Academic Support Program gives responsibility to students at all stages of administration, execution and activity design. By taking responsibility students internalize the learning culture smoothly to make it more sustainable. The focus is on quality of learning and supporting inquisitiveness rather than teaching or tutoring specific concepts. This in turn naturally enhances cognition levels of the students. Program incorporates effective teaching and learning methods in its activities.

Primarily the Academic Support Program and Center for Individual and Academic Development carries out the mission to form a linkage between quality of the teaching process and the learning outcomes.

## **6. Conclusion: Considerations and Limitations**

The university along with the system is quite young and still in progress. I founded the Academic Support Program in 1999 as a part of the Center. At that time most of the other programs have been evolving and some are still very recent. In particular learning outcomes are among the recent projects. Elapsed time is short and this affects adequacy of scientific analysis. There is still a room for a long term research, further quantitative and qualitative analysis of structural relationships between the latent and other observed factors. Cross examination of other student support units must also be analyzed.

However early results show the effectiveness of the program in quality of learning and its' efficiency. Though configured in line with Sabancı University's structure and interdisciplinary academic programs, the main principles of the system are universal and the model can be utilized in other institutions with some minor structural changes.

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