The American Association of College and Universities (AAC&U) reports that "53% of students entering our colleges and universities are academically underprepared, i.e., lacking basic skills in at least one of the three basic areas of reading, writing or mathematics" (Tritelli, 2003). This is a 33% increase in the number of academically underprepared students since 1996 (NCES).

Define Underprepared vs. Underperforming

**Underprepared**: refers to a student whose academic skills fall below those needed to be successful in college including reading, writing and math skills (Dzubak, n.d.)

**Underperforming**: refers to a student who appears to have the academic background (preparation) to be successful in college courses, but in actuality, is not seeing positive results (grades).

Where do ‘college readiness skills’ such as time management, effective study skills, exam preparation, etc. fit?

Why is this issue so prevalent today?

**Causes of being underprepared** - Causes are as diverse as the pool of students: large diversity in race, age, socioeconomic background, previous academic experience, test scores, and geographical location.

- Prior educational experiences (academic failure, poor preparation or low expectations)
- Some evidence that educational standards in high school have been gradually lowered during the last two decades in addition to ‘HS grade inflation not accurately reflecting learning’ (Dzubak, p.6).
- Possible societal trend that parents EXPECT to see high marks on report cards but not making studying a priority for their overscheduled kids (Dzubak, p. 6).
- Technology – Changing student’s learning styles
  - Today, students are increasingly ‘Visually and Kinesthetically Sophisticated’ - not programmed to sit passively and absorb material auditorily (Dzubak, p.7).
  - Result: Student’s expect to be entertained or in an active, interactive and stimulating classroom environment.

**Underperforming may be based upon**

- Attitude and behaviors shaped/reinforced by previous experiences
- Self-Efficacy, Self-expectations, self-confidence, Self management
- Insufficient study skills such as time management, exam preparation, prioritization, organization, etc.
- Unmotivated, lack of goals to facilitate focused energy/interest
- Doing what was done in the past expecting to achieve similar results (A’s in HS vs. A’s in college)

Intrusive advising involves intentional contact with students with the goal of developing a caring and beneficial relationship that leads to increased academic motivation and persistence. While academic coaching does not take the place of academic advising, it serves as another intentional contact with students. Student retention research suggests that “contact with a significant person within an institution of higher education is a crucial factor in a student’s decision to remain in college” (Varney, 2007).
Supporting students through Academic Coaching

- Individual appointment: Identify the root issue: is it underprepared or underperforming?
- Holistic student development – Encourage self awareness, self-management, self-efficacy by understanding his/her strengths, interests, purpose and passion
- Schedule several meetings (prior to midterms) which establish accountability check points and a timetable for grade checks/performance review (i.e. grade report form) and to address issues of underperforming (inadequate preparation for exams, skipping class, etc.)
- Utilize Stacking Conversations
  - First conversation: Introduction to student/concerns, outline your role, discuss classes*, career goals, semester goals, develop a plan for follow-up, and set high expectations that can be achieved with your support!
    - *Match student learning style strengths to course delivery/teaching style to build confidence as student finds success
    - Set 2nd meeting date, time and key points for discussion
    - Follow up via email within 48 hours summarizing the meeting and reminding of next meeting details
  - Second Conversation: Review progress in courses/goals, address academic skills and suggest techniques for skill building, Referral to appropriate resources
    - Set 3rd meeting date, time and key points for discussion
    - Follow up via email within 48 hours summarizing the meeting and reminding of next meeting details
  - REPEAT for additional meetings as needed
- Appropriate referrals
  - Underprepared = Tutoring, SI, Help Rooms, Prof Office Hours, TA, Study groups
  - Underperforming = Study skills course, Academic Coaching, Study Groups
  - Outside influences (family issues, personal crisis): Personal Counseling, Career Services, Disability Services, Financial Aid/Counseling

Further research: Needed regarding the preparedness/performance of students of color, low-income, 1st generation and other special student populations, impact of parental support, and the importance of a positive transition.

References: