

Ankeny Academic Achievement Center 1975-2013

By Sue Wickham

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<https://dmacc.edu/academicachievement/Pages/welcome.aspx>

From 1975 to 2013, I was an instructor in the Ankeny Campus Comprehensive Learning Center, renamed the Academic Achievement Center in the 1990s. Those 38 years gave me the opportunity to participate in the evolution of an outstanding academic support service at DMACC.

The CLC began in 1969 as a one-person operation, where Nancy Johnson provided individualized help to Adult Basic Education, High School Completion, and English as a Second Language students in addition to teaching classroom sections of Developmental Reading, Speed Reading, and the reading segment of the Communication Skills course for vocational students. By the time I was hired through a Title III grant to teach English in the CLC, Nancy had been joined by Jane Pitz, who focused on ABE and high school completion; Bob Jansen, the math instructor; Vicky Wheeler, the part-time evening instructor; John Niemeyer, the program coordinator; and Sue Heston, our administrative assistant.

Our original title, Comprehensive Learning Center, aptly described not just the variety of subjects we taught, but also the range of credit and non-credit programs we housed: Adult Basic Education, Adult High School Diploma, High School Equivalency, Pre-admissions, Enrichment, and college homework help. We offered diagnostic testing, created individual study plans, and helped our students meet their academic goals. Although our core mission—“to create a positive learning environment which empowers students to become independent, self-confident, and efficient life-long learners”—remained stable over the years, the size and make-up of our student population varied; we served young high school drop-outs, veterans, refugees and other immigrants, international students, displaced workers, single parents—individuals with emotional, social, and economic needs at least as important as their academic concerns. Providing moral support and making appropriate referrals for additional assistance were often as important teaching these students.

Curriculum development was an integral part of the job for CLC/AAC instructors. We created instructional handouts as well as entire courses for the High School Diploma program, ranging from Short Stories to Chemistry and even Iowa Government, developed by Jane Pitz as the creative project for her master’s degree program. Since many of us taught developmental courses as part of our regular faculty load, we also revised existing college credit adaptor courses (now called college prep) and constructed new ones as needed, splitting Developmental Reading into two levels and adding Pre-Algebra as a transition from College Arithmetic to Algebra I. In 2000, Cal Whitehurst proposed a revision of the Study Strategies class that gave it 100-level status, allowing students to apply credits for this course toward their degrees. Margie Ranch was instrumental in revamping the one-credit SDV108 course, which became mandatory for new college students. Occasionally we were directed to tailor courses for small-group or individualized instruction in vocational programs, such as Communication Skills for

Upholstery and Math for Wastewater Operators. In the late 1980s, Center instructors created Project REACH, a summer program to prepare returning adult students for their first semester of college. In 1995-1996, AAC instructors collaborated on two grant-funded projects to design curricula for teaching GED on the ICN (Iowa Communications Network) and for improving job-related academic skills measured by the ACT WorkKeys tests.

Title III grants and other college initiatives periodically brought new educational technology to the CLC/AAC. In the 1970s, our reading room was equipped with tachistoscopes, shadowsopes, and controlled readers, devices used to improve word recognition and rate. The AutoTutor machines and some of our textbooks used a programmed learning format that prefigured today's interactive computer-based instruction. In the early 1980s we were given enough Apple computers to stock a small lab, where in 20 minutes students could learn the wonders of word processing using our PFS Write floppy disks. Our Chemistry instructor, Dick Claassen, designed online practice exercises for the Center's Pre-admissions Chemistry course. As learning technology evolved, we purchased NovaNET, PLATO, and, later, Education 2000 online software to supplement basic skills instruction for GED and developmental coursework. Still, the heart of instruction in the Center remained one-to-one assistance—the human touch.

In addition to providing direct instruction, CLC/AAC instructors served as institutional resources on issues related to basic skills. We always had a faculty member on the Curriculum Commission. We took active roles in ad hoc committees studying alternatives for entrance assessment, placement, and developmental education programming. One ongoing collaborative project was the DMACC Academic Skills Guide. For 30 years, we periodically interviewed all program chairs to identify the reading, English, math, computer, and thinking skills needed for success in their programs and on the job. We compiled the results of those interviews in booklets, which were distributed to our college advisors and counselors, area high schools, and agencies that referred students to DMACC. In 2000, when funding was no longer provided to reprint an updated Skills Guide, we arranged to publish the information on the DMACC website and continued to update the online Guide through 2013. That project was described as a “best practice” in Robert McCabe's *Yes We Can! A Community College Guide for Helping America's Underprepared*, published in 2003.

CLC/AAC instructors also took leadership positions both inside and outside of the institution. When Dr. Ken Shibata, Vice President of Instruction during the 1980s, introduced Quality Circles to DMACC, the CLC team volunteered to form the first circle on campus. We used that structure to devise a Center staffing plan during the college's transition from the quarter system to the semester system. Several of us were active members of the DMACC Higher Education Association, serving as building representatives and members of the Executive Board and the bargaining team. We were also active in the Iowa Developmental Education Association, serving on the executive board, frequently presenting at annual state conferences, and occasionally representing DMACC as presenters at national conferences. Three CLC/AAC members—Jane Pitz and John Niemeyer in the 1980s and Dan Nelson in 2012—attended the prestigious four-

week Kellogg Institute for Adult and Developmental Educators, returning to the Center with new perspectives on our mission.

Our Center team was not composed solely of instructors. The CLC/AAC administrative assistants were vital to our operation, not just to support faculty and administrators, but also to run testing operations. Because we were responsible for administering GED and High School Diploma course exams, our Center originally included a separate testing room. Gradually, our testing mission expanded to include drop-in testing for pre-admissions students and those taking college courses. For a few terms, for instance, all the Diesel students took their exams with us. Later, we became the campus-wide make-up testing center and also monitored tests for students taking correspondence courses at other institutions.

Reorganizations at DMACC periodically changed departmental oversight of the CLC/AAC. Initially, the Center was administered by Nick Bellizzi, Dean of Adult Education. In the 1980s, we were shifted to Student and Educational Development; in the 1990s, to Economic Development; and in the 2000s, to Program Development. Our location changed as well, from lower campus in 1969 to Building 6 in the 1970s, where we were first housed just east of the library. In the 1980s, we moved to the central part of the building now used by the Tutoring Department.

Those occasional changes had far less impact on our operations than two administrative decisions about a decade apart. In 1989 the Youth At Risk program was introduced: a cooperative effort with area high schools to coordinate support leading to high school completion. YAR dramatically expanded the number of younger students attending the Center; it also added a correspondence course option to the Adult High School Diploma program that became a hugely popular avenue to credit recovery. CLC/AAC faculty were responsible for grading all of the correspondence exams, while Cal Whitehurst, the AAC chair, maintained communication with the local high school counselors who oversaw their students' work.

Offering a one-stop shop for providing academic support services had definite advantages. AAC instructors could use their academic coaching talents to serve whoever walked through the door, regardless of program label. Students preparing for their GED tests could see college students working on similar skills; they developed a sense of belonging at DMACC that facilitated transitioning to college courses after completing high school. However, increasing enrollments in both High School Completion and college programs complicated delivery of AAC services. In 1999 DMACC's administration separated the two programs, with High School Completion (YAR, GED, and HSD) moving to Building 17 and the AAC moving one more time, to its current Building 6 location, where we concentrated on Pre-admissions, Enrichment, and college students. At this point, the Peer Tutoring and STRIVE programs were moved next to the AAC; the adjacent computer lab was expanded, becoming part of Tech Support; and make-up testing services were absorbed by the Assessment Center, housed in another part of Building 6.

When the two prongs of the program were divided, the AAC was already offering homework help in reading, writing, study skills, math, chemistry, physics, and biology. To these core areas were added help in accounting, economics, psychology, computer

applications, and Spanish. More part-time instructors were hired; in addition, several full-time instructors from other departments worked a few hours a week to provide adequate staffing. The Writing Lab, previously housed in the AAC but staffed by English instructors from the Sciences and Humanities department, was now cooperatively staffed by AAC and English department faculty.

Our new, narrower focus allowed us to provide additional services. As time permitted on new student registration days, we went next door to the computer lab to help with course selection, concentrating on students for whom college prep courses were recommended. We developed a series of study strategies and writing workshops, offered each semester and free to all students. When invited by program instructors, we made in-class presentations such as Study Skills for Nursing and EMT. AAC instructors also offered short workshops for prospective students, particularly those enrolling in Finite Math and Calculus, to review math skills and offer a reality check on course readiness.

Regardless of the configuration of the Center or the department in which it was housed, some challenges persisted. One was finding a balance between instructors' classroom teaching assignments and their Center hours. As campus enrollment increased, so did the number of college prep course sections. Not infrequently, Center instructors were assigned up to half their teaching loads in the classroom, meaning that more adjunct instructors were needed to provide adequate AAC coverage. Despite the staffing difficulties, one benefit of this combined teaching load was that students taking courses with Center instructors were more likely to use the Center for homework help. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Center instructors taught individualized sections of reading and study skills courses for students unable to fit the classroom sections into their schedules. That approach proved too labor intensive to continue.

A second ongoing challenge was internal marketing to build our image. Many students and staff—if they were aware of us at all—thought of the Center as a place only for individuals with learning difficulties: “struggling students.” One reason we changed our name in the early 1990s from Comprehensive Learning Center to Academic Achievement Center was to dispel this stigma. We created flyers and brochures, attended departmental meetings, designed a welcoming webpage, and made classroom visits each semester to acquaint both students and colleagues with our services, emphasizing that our most loyal Center users were those most committed to academic success.

In 2012, we compiled an Ankeny Academic Achievement Center Student Outcomes Report demonstrating, course by course, that students who used the AAC three or more times during a term outperformed their peers from all Ankeny sections in course completion rates, pass rates, and success (C or higher) rates. But the heartwarming student comments on Center evaluations best showed our impact: “The center is fantastic! The teachers are amazing! They always manage to build my self-confidence and answer my questions in a way that I understand clearly. . . . Thank you for all the help/critique/encouragement, happy to have this available.”

I cannot imagine a more professionally and personally satisfying teaching career than the one I had in the CLC/AAC. I'm grateful for the variety of instructional challenges—never knowing who would walk through our door next or with what question; for the

chance to interact with students as individuals with unique backgrounds, strengths, and needs; and, most of all, for the support of the rest of the CLC/AAC team, colleagues who over the years became true friends.

I can't begin to name the many outstanding part-time instructors and support staff who have helped the Center complete its mission. I think the following list of full-time CLC/AAC Center staff from 1975 to 2013 is complete.

Faculty	Administrative Assistants
Nancy Johnson, ABE, ESL, Reading	Sue Heston
John Niemeyer, Coordinator	Shirley Barrett
Jane Pitz, ABE, HSC, Chair	Sheri Husak
Bob Jansen, Math	Enola
Sue Wickham, English, Reading/Study Skills	Susan Rhoades
Dick Claassen, Math, Chemistry	Marlys Frazier
Michelle Mosman, Math	Heidi Heilskov
Janet Tidwell, English	Cindy Keese
Willis Dobbins, HSC	Gretchen Spencer
Pat Halverson, Reading, Study Skills, Chair	
Cal Whitehurst, English, Reading/Study Skills, Chair	
Linda Wehage Gardner, Reading	
Jill Hutcheson, YAR, HSC	
Sonya Brand, YAR, HSC	
Margie Ranch, Reading	
Bob Wollaston, Biology	
Lisa Brumback, Math	
Stacy Vaughn, Biology	
Bryce Linkvis, Math	
Dan Nelson, English, Reading/Study Skills	
Rob Reynolds, Math	

**Post-note: Following research of several 2-year and 4-year institutions across the nation, the DMACC Library Speech Center, under the direction of Judith Vogel, began its services in a Library room under the Academic Achievement Center umbrella in 2014. Due to campus construction, the DMACC Speech Center was moved in 2015 to Bldg. 8. In 2017 it was housed in Bldg. 6 near the rest of the Academic Achievement Center. DMACC was the first community college in the state of Iowa to create a speech center for its students. Refer to DMACC Speech Center under the "Special Topics" tab on the Pioneers History Project website for further history of the Speech Center .
(Addition by J. Vogel)