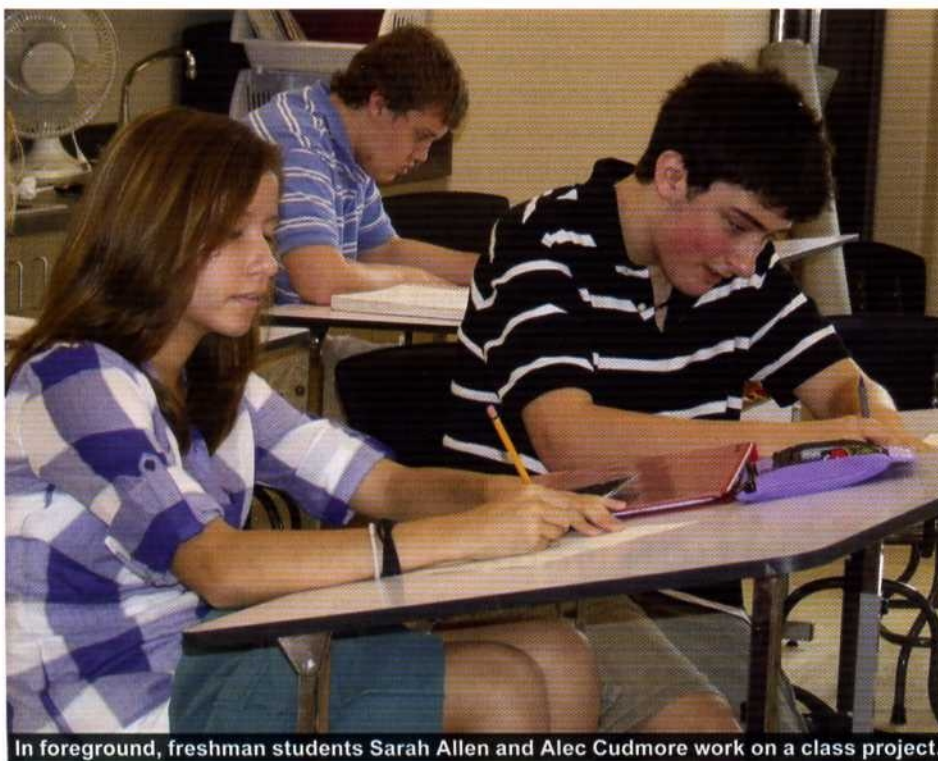


St. Michael's Catholic Academy Serves All College-Bound Students, Including Those with Special Learning Needs

Learning Center offers equal access and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act

Susan Maher and Chuck Yarling



In foreground, freshman students Sarah Allen and Alec Cudmore work on a class project.

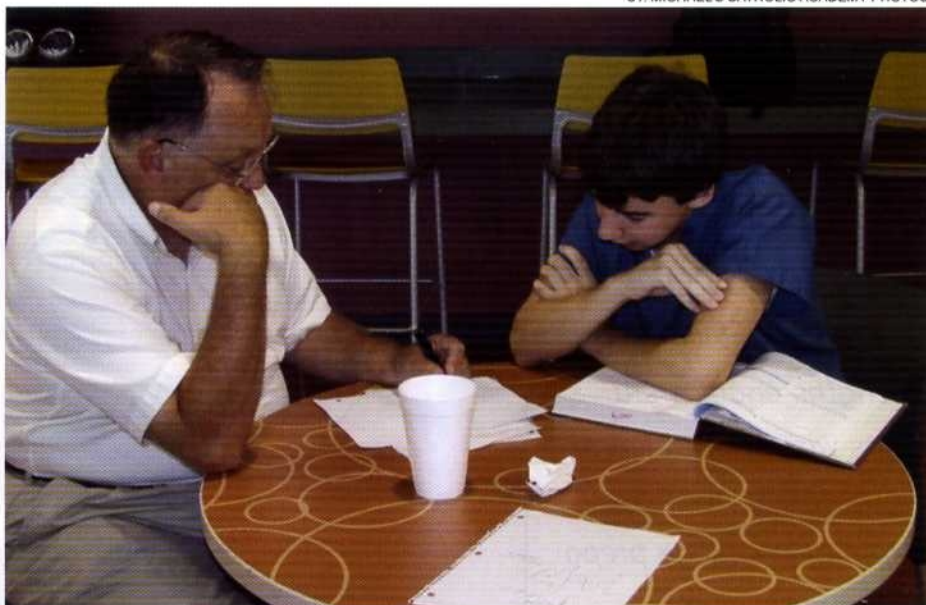
Ten years ago, the administration of St. Michael's Catholic Academy decided to open a Learning Center at its Austin, Texas, campus. The center was proposed to serve all of the academy's college-bound students, including those who were having difficulty in school and those with special learning needs.

Parents and community leaders donated time and funds to provide a position for a disability specialist to lead the center and, in 1998, St. Michael's Catholic Academy officially opened the Learning Center, one of the first at a secondary school in the United States. Because the founding director previously had served students with disabilities in post-secondary education, creating a program for high school students who were college-bound was a natural match for her experience. Over the last 10 years, the director has offered outreach support to many Catholic schools wanting to begin a program founded on our Learning Center model.

The Learning Center and the ADA

Catholic education generally supports diversity within the student population on a national level. However, the Learning Center model at St. Michael's Catholic Academy also strives to meet the basic standards of civil rights law as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The core value of equal access for those qualified students in Catholic education within ADA guidelines mirrors the church's commitment to social justice. ADA is a legal framework designed to end discrimination of all kinds, which allows St. Michael's the flexibility to provide an accessible, college preparatory program grounded in Christian values.

Susan Maher holds a B.S. in education with a major in curriculum and instruction from Texas A&M University and an M.Ed. in special education and educational psychology from the University of Houston. She has more than 20 years of experience as an educator, educational diagnostician and disability service provider in all levels of education. She is the founding director of the Learning Center at St. Michael's Catholic Academy. She was previously a teacher at St. Cecilia Catholic School and later became a founding school board member of John Paul II Catholic School, both in Houston, Texas (smaher@smca.com). **Chuck Yarling** holds a B.A. in mathematics and a B.S. in electrical engineering from the University of Texas. He received an M.A. with an education major from Texas State University in May 2008. He was a process engineer for 24 years in the semiconductor manufacturing industry and since 2001 has been a math teacher at St. Michael's Catholic Academy. He has written five books and authored more than 70 papers for a variety of peer-reviewed journals and trade magazines (cyarling@smca.com).



Math teacher Don Haynes works with freshman Alex Schulte.

More specifically, the ADA prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities participating in educational programs and is intended to provide students with disabilities the same educational opportunities that others receive. In order to ensure that this goal is met, both physical and programmatic access is provided, which means that appropriate academic adjustments are provided in the instructional process—such as extended time or a quiet room—that offer some students a means to achieve their academic success.

Students with special needs often bring diverse yet unique strengths and experiences to the campus. Although some students learn in different ways, these differences do not mean that the students have inferior capacities. Thus, the following factors need to be considered when determining an educational plan: (1) physical accessibility, (2) how to provide access to information, (3) how to provide opportunity for meaningful participation in certain activities such as labs and (4) how to evaluate fairly on the basis of achievement rather than disability.

A disability specialist is needed in order to evaluate these factors and interpret the documented assessments to determine how best to provide services that meet the demands of the essential elements, while at the same

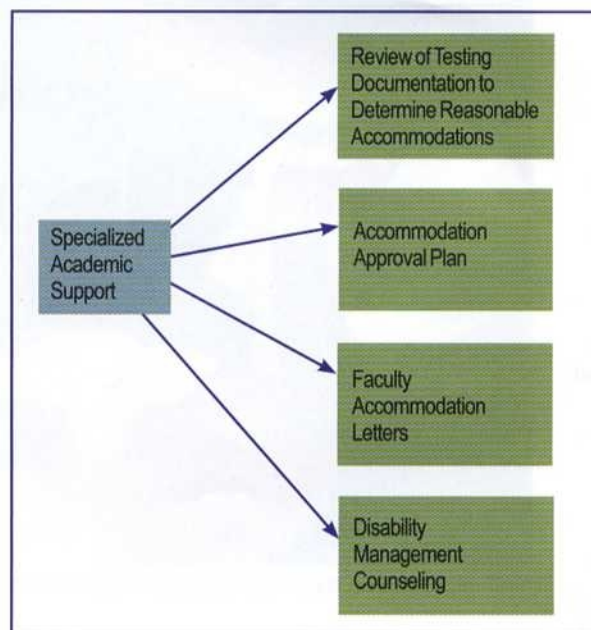
time provide reasonable support for each student. The guidelines of ADA allow the school to determine best how to accomplish this goal of access while maintaining the core values of the school mission.

St. Michael's mission is "to serve a diverse student body" while preparing "the whole student for leadership, service and decision-making consistent with Catholic values." Academic support is a critical component that exists in all levels within the programming at St. Michael's. The Learning Center model creates an inclusive environment that values all students' learning struggle and provides a safe haven of support and guidance as they traverse through high school and discover their own personal calling in life.

Referral to the Learning Center

Students are referred to the Learning Center in several ways. Incoming freshmen and transfer students attend a study skills seminar during orientation. After the seminar, students are informed that they are welcome to visit the Learning Center if they feel they need academic assistance. These students also take entrance exams and those with low scores are referred to the Learning Center.

Figure 1. Types of Academic Support



"The combination of academic accommodations and individual learning strengths enables students with special learning needs to meet the rigors of a college preparatory curriculum."

The director of the Learning Center works closely with the admissions director to review all applications to create summaries of the types of services that may be provided so that parents are able to make informed decisions about enrolling their child in St. Michael's.

In order to ensure an open-admissions policy, medical and physical disclosures are not required. However, parents are encouraged to discuss any special need that a student might have to ensure that all available services are reviewed and explored in

the admissions process.

Within the first few weeks of school, teachers may refer students experiencing difficulty to the Learning Center. The Learning Center director works closely with the guidance counselor in reviewing student performance and interventions for success.

Support Offered by the Learning Center

The Learning Center offers two types of support for students: general

academic support and diagnostic support.

General academic support is available to all students and includes the study skills seminar previously mentioned. Basic study skills interventions through the Learning Center, along with referrals to the National Honor Society peer-tutoring program, often are the first interventions offered to struggling students. Computerized academic screening in math and reading also are implemented at the freshman and sophomore level in order to support skills of improvement.

Specialized academic support (Figure 1) is provided to students referred to the Learning Center and is determined by the director on a case-by-case basis. These services may include extended testing time, recorded textbook and volunteer note takers. The combination of academic accommodations and individual learning strengths enables students with special learning needs to meet the rigors of a college preparatory curriculum. Once the specific accommodations have been identified and a plan has been approved, letters are sent to the teachers of each student notifying teachers of the specialized support needed for the student to succeed in class. Counseling is provided to students who may have difficulty in managing their time.

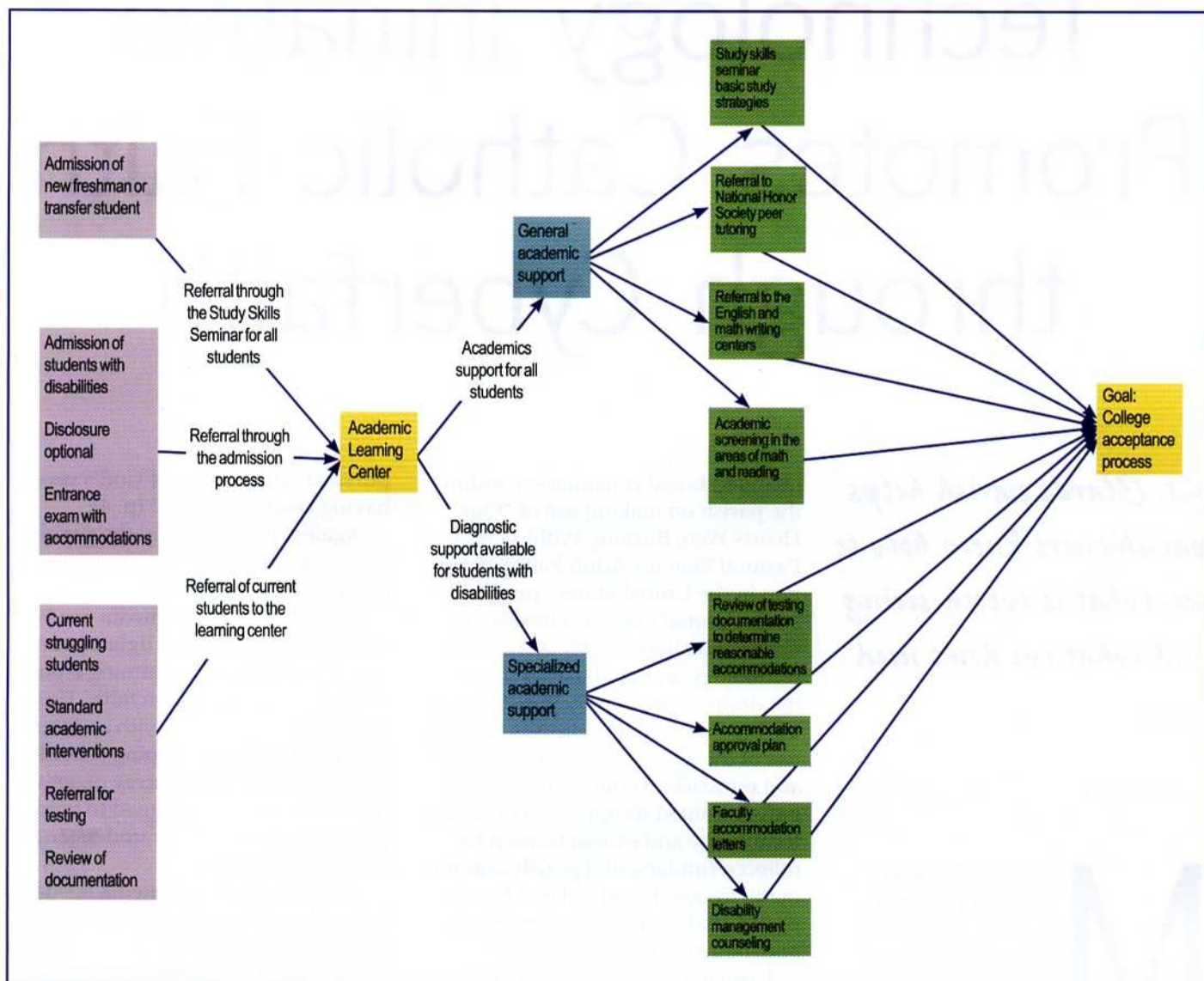
Students with a learning need and those without learn the essence of what is involved in learning complex materials and how best to integrate this new learning for mastery of the course material, which is the core of the programming. All will benefit and become independent learners, which is key to success in college.

Support services, whether they are diagnostically driven for students with specialized needs or generalized services for all students, follow a model of the types of services

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Figure 2. How the activities of the Academic Learning Center focus on the primary goal of college acceptance



“Students with special needs often bring diverse yet unique strengths and experiences to the campus. Although some students learn in different ways, these differences do not mean that the students have inferior capacities.”

provided at most universities in the United States.

The Overall Picture

Whether a student is in need of specialized support or not, the services provided through the Learning Center from orientation to graduation are designed to create a learning environment that supports the school’s mission to serve a diverse student body. Figure 2 shows how the activities of St. Michael’s

Learning Center plays a role in the primary goal of seeing its students receive an acceptance letter to a college or university by the time they graduate.

St. Michael’s embraces the guidelines of ADA and finds no conflict within the laws of ADA and St. Michael’s overall mission to provide a Christian-based college preparatory education. St. Michael’s remains committed to the school’s mission statement:

“St. Michael’s Catholic Academy is a college-preparatory school founded by laity within the Diocese of Austin to serve a diverse student body. Combining academic excellence with faith formation and co-curricular learning opportunities, St. Michael’s prepares the whole student for leadership, service and decision-making consistent with Catholic values.”

St. Michael’s graduates become true leaders who are well prepared to interact with a diverse community to include those with special needs.

Reference

ADA. (1990). Americans With Disabilities Act. Retrieved July 8, 2008, from <http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm>. ■