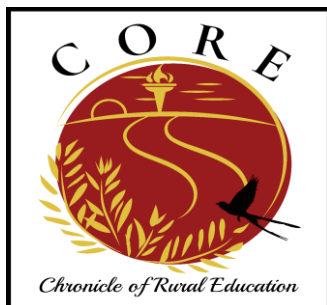




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Practitioner's Corner

From Skepticism to Support: Supplemental Instruction for Improved Learning

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There is a significant amount of research detailing the positive outcomes of Supplemental Instruction (SI). However, research has historically focused on SI success at larger universities instead of rural institutions (Hensen & Shelley, 2003; Skoglund et al., 2018). Supplemental Instruction, a peer-led group tutoring model, includes prepared lessons and engaging activities designed to enhance the content discussed during the lecture portion of a course. While the model has proven successful at hundreds of universities (Skoglund et al., 2018), some faculty are still skeptical; and faculty resistance often proves to be a challenge for institutions aiming to pilot a new academic support program. This article provides research-based, best practices used to support student improvement at one rural, regional institution – practices that moved many faculty members at the institution from skepticism to embracing Supplemental Instruction.

Introduction

The impact of Supplemental Instruction (SI), a model of peer-led tutoring that was developed in 1973 at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), has long been established (Hensen & Shelley, 2003). Several studies have shown that college students who utilize Supplemental Instruction earn higher grades in their courses (Hensen & Shelley, 2003; Pugatch & Wilson, 2018; Yue et al. 2018). Instead of a traditional tutoring model, where students take problems or questions to a tutor, an SI session includes engaging activities that are rooted in effective learning

strategies (Skoglund et al. 2018). Students who need help do not have to articulate exactly how they need help or what they do not understand; instead, the SI leaders initiate learning activities to guide students through difficult content.

Supplemental Instruction leaders are students who have previously taken the course and done well in it. The SI leader attends the course throughout the semester. The SI leader creates lessons that supplement the content in the lectures, which can make it easier for students to grasp concepts they may not have when the professor discussed them (Hensen & Shelley, 2003). SI leaders present their lessons during the sessions and answer questions students may have. SI leaders use strategies that promote active learning.

Since every SI session is prepared in advance, even students who are too intimidated to ask questions can benefit. Perhaps this is why Supplemental Instruction is such an effective academic support model. SI has been shown to increase the probability of retention for students with low GPAs (Skoglund et al., 2018). Additional research has shown that students from traditionally disadvantaged groups have also benefitted from SI (Yue et al. 2018). These research conclusions support the idea that SI could be a particularly effective strategy for institutions with a high number of Pell-eligible or First-Generation students.

With so many advantages to Supplemental Instruction, gaining buy-in from faculty should be easy. However, many faculty may be disengaged because of prior experiences with low attendance or because of a belief that students who aren't doing well in the course won't attend SI. It is important to develop intentional strategies to help alleviate these concerns. This article makes the case that:

- The advantages for SI are widespread among student groups (Skoglund et al. 2018; Yue et al. 2018)
- There is not a significant expectation of investment from faculty
- There are effective ways to promote and encourage SI attendance.

With promotion and a bit of flexibility, it is possible to create an SI program that students will engage with. Once an improvement in student grades is realized, it can be used to gather further faculty and institutional support, and allow the program to grow further.

Faculty support is an essential part of a successful SI program. First, the faculty member needs to approve of the SI leader attending the course. Second, the faculty member will ideally engage with the SI leader, introducing the leader to the students and encouraging session attendance. This engagement can be helpful without being a burden for the faculty. A quick introduction of the SI leader and a reminder that SI is available for the course may drive session attendance without adding to the workload for faculty.

Establishing the Need for Extra Support

While the definitions of “rural” have varied, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) considers the size of an institution's setting (the population of the town or city) and the proximity of the institution to a larger metropolitan area (Manly, et al. 2019) to determine rurality. Studies

have confirmed specific challenges that rural students face, including less technology access and higher rates of poverty compared to non-rural peers (Lin & Riccomini, 2025). Supplemental instruction can be presented as a way to help bridge the gap that is often found in these students' academic knowledge and skillsets. When rural students arrive at college unprepared, it can have a serious negative impact on their academic achievement, so they should be encouraged, and perhaps even incentivized, to begin attending SI sessions.

Suggestions for a Successful Supplemental Instruction Program

The rural, regional institution discussed in this article (East Central University, ECU), utilized multiple strategies to give its new Supplemental Instruction program a solid start. Choosing to pilot an SI program with a small, manageable number of SI leaders and corresponding courses may be a suitable option to ensure that the program starts well. If faculty lose faith, especially early in the program, they may continue to be skeptical, which can in turn negatively influence their colleagues regarding the perception of the program.

Carefully Chose Courses

Search for courses in which SI leaders can maximize their impact. Ideally, a gateway course where first-year students typically struggle is ideal for Supplemental Instruction. At ECU, faculty were given the opportunity to recommend former students for SI leader positions. If the faculty member has concerns about the SI leader, then the partnership will not be successful, so allowing faculty to have a role in the decision-making was important.

Other than occasionally checking in with the SI leader, the faculty member need not expend much energy. This should make it easier for hesitant faculty to become more supportive. Of course, if a faculty member is absolutely unsupportive, it would be best to choose other courses for SI. Moving forward with a faculty member whose aim is to prove that SI won't be successful or who will not encourage students to use SI would be detrimental to the program.

Train and Communicate with Supplemental Instruction Leaders

It is essential for SI leaders to have a strong understanding of what an SI session should look like so the sessions are distinct from traditional types of tutoring. Offering the leaders suggestions on how to deal with situations that may arise, such as a student being discouraged about failing a recent exam or students being too shy to answer questions, can help prepare the SI leaders to handle those situations without allowing the SI session to be hijacked or becoming unproductive.

SI leaders are expected to arrive at the session with a plan. Providing a planning template to ensure leaders dedicate enough time and thought to planning their sessions can alleviate this concern. It can also be helpful to offer any supplies SI leaders and their students may need (e.g., notecards, chemistry molecule sets, planners, etc.).

Regular communication with SI leaders throughout the semester is important to make sure they have an established and productive, working relationship with the faculty member teaching the course. Sometimes SI leaders struggle with the working relationship, but instructors also can be uncertain of how to navigate this new dynamic. If the SI leader mentions a concern regarding the

course instructor, then it may be necessary for the SI supervisor to intervene and reconnect the SI leader and faculty member. Communication and follow through are important on both ends of the SI working relationship.

Consistent Supplemental Instruction Sessions

SI leaders need to establish a consistent time and day for the weekly SI session(s) so students can make SI attendance a part of their routine. SI leaders should introduce themselves on the first day of class, take a quick poll (a QR code can be useful) to see what days and times work best for most students, and then schedule sessions. Changing the day of the week or the time of the session can lead to confusion and make consistent attendance more challenging for students. Throughout the semester, the SI leader should be visible in the class. The SI leader should try to engage with students and encourage SI attendance. Faculty promoting SI attendance also has a positive impact on student participation.

Gather Feedback from Students

Giving students the opportunity to provide anonymous, candid feedback can help shape the program tremendously. The program administrator should deploy a survey to ask students who have participated in SI sessions about their experiences. Students can share feedback about what helped them the most, as well as what was the least helpful. Students may also have specific perspectives on which activities and strategies were most effective for a particular course. This data should be used to make changes to the SI program as needed.

Gather Data and Share Positives Far and Wide

To gather momentum with collaborators, it is essential to report back with positive outcomes. If data shows an increase in student performance or retention, emphasize the role of SI to faculty and other stakeholders who may have been hesitant. Once the data shows that the program is being used and impactful, growth will increase. Midterm grades, final grades and student feedback from surveys can all be important pieces of data to reframe the perception of Supplemental Instruction.

Supplemental Instruction at East Central University

East Central University (Ada, OK) is a member institution of the Regional University System of Oklahoma, and has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 3,500 students. The 2020 United States census listed Ada, OK with a population of 16,479, making ECU a solidly rural institution. Over 70% of the students are Pell-eligible, approximately one-third are First-Generation students, and the vast majority of students are graduates of rural schools in Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas.

Supplemental Instruction was piloted at East Central University during the spring 2024 semester. Two Supplemental Instruction leaders were hired; one was partnered with a US government class, and the other was partnered with college algebra. Both of these courses are part of the general education requirements of the university. From the beginning, the SI leaders struggled to get students to attend the sessions. The session times were established early, but with only a couple of attendees, the sessions soon simply became a rehash of the lecture and the SI leaders

did not feel motivated to dedicate their time to planning sessions. Additionally, the SI leaders did not feel confident promoting the sessions. The feedback students provided through end-of-semester anonymous surveys showed that 50% of the students were satisfied with the SI sessions.

After the semester pilot ended, the SI program coordinator attended a Supplemental Instruction conference hosted through University of Missouri-Kansas City's International Center for Supplemental Instruction. Training for SI leaders was further developed that summer, with training becoming more specific and grounded in the best practices learned at the conference. Training now included suggested learning activities and templates for SI leaders to use to plan and evaluate their sessions. The training also emphasized the importance of promoting the sessions with confidence, speaking to students before and after the class, and trying to make students feel welcome at SI. During the fall 2024 and spring 2025 semesters, SI attendance, which was recorded through sign-in sheets at SI sessions, more than tripled.

Data collected from final grades reported by faculty at the end of the fall and spring semesters showed a positive correlation between the final course grade and SI attendance. For the 2024-2025 academic year, 94% of students who attended SI finished the course and passed, with 87.4% of attendees earning a "C" or higher. Since the courses using SI historically had "D/F/W" rates of 22%+, these results were highly celebrated on campus.

The survey results compiled from anonymous student surveys revealed student satisfaction increased to 88%, and students provided feedback such as "[my SI leader] was my saving grace. I wouldn't have passed the class without SI." Additional students shared similar sentiments. Following these results, a number of faculty members requested having an SI leader assigned to their courses.

Conclusion

Supplemental Instruction has proven to be a tremendous academic support resource for students, and rural institutions, where resources are often limited, may find Supplemental Instruction an effective and financially feasible option to meet the tutoring needs of their students. SI expands on the benefits of traditional peer-led tutoring and guides students toward utilizing active learning strategies. While starting a program can be daunting, consistent SI leaders who create engaging content can help students achieve higher grades and be more likely to meet their goals.

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