

CLASS: A Framework for Strategic Thinking and Actions during Academic and Workplace Transitions

Adam Denney, *East Carolina University*

Sarah C. Williams, *East Carolina University*

Danielle Dietz, *East Carolina University*

Alysha Gray, *North Carolina Department of Public Instruction*

The CLASS framework is a versatile tool college students with learning disabilities can use when learning how to proactively and intentionally navigate new educational and work environments. This theoretical framework provides a concrete model for strategic thought processes, routines, and dialogues that can be adapted to fit different student support models.

The CLASS Framework

Public colleges and universities are required to ensure no qualified individual is discriminated against based on disability (Americans with Disabilities Act, Title 2, 1990; Rehabilitation Act, 1973). However, providing basic access to educational opportunities may not be sufficient for some students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) who have the potential for success in postsecondary education, but only if provided support that is aligned with their learning strengths and needs. Campus experiences and outcomes vary among individual students, but literature across decades of research suggests students with LD may encounter a myriad of challenges in the postsecondary environment (Conner, 2012; Evans et al., 2017; Fleming et al., 2017; Heiman & Precel, 2003; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2010). That said, research also suggests that explicit instruction in strategies and/or student use of campus-provided support services can make a positive difference in academic outcomes for students with learning and attention differences (Farmer et al., 2015; Lightner et al., 2012; Troiano et al., 2010). This paper describes a model educators may find helpful while teaching students with SLD to be strategic in learning and vocational environments after graduating high school.

The STEPP Program at East Carolina University is an academic support program for university students with SLD who exhibit the potential for college success in addition to high-risk indicators for challenges. The program provides a small community of support located within a large university setting and offers resources such as near-peer mentoring, peer tutoring, co-advising, a consistent weekly structure, and a cohesive co-curriculum. Students in the program select majors across a wide variety of disciplines, and retention and graduation outcomes for these students greatly exceed national estimates for college students with learning disabilities.

Over the past seventeen years since the program was created, the [Program Name] team has used student outcomes and alumni feedback to refine our co-curricular elements that are designed to help students transition from high school to college graduation. The CLASS framework is a result of those efforts and helps students build skills in critical thinking, leadership, self-knowledge, and self-advocacy that can be applied in college and after graduation.

Each letter in the CLASS acronym prompts a thought process or action. In using the framework, those general thought processes remain constant and are woven throughout our student support services. Specific prompts change slightly from micro to macro thinking as students reach three key transition points in the college experience: high school to college (course level), general education to selected major (curriculum level), and college to career (career level). When adapting to various learning environments, some students innately develop academic routines based

on their learning profiles, but others may need to be taught these metacognitive processes directly (Chevalier et al., 2017). The CLASS framework is designed to help students with SLD effectively navigate these transitions by establishing proactive and strategic routines and identifying appropriate support in each learning or work environment.

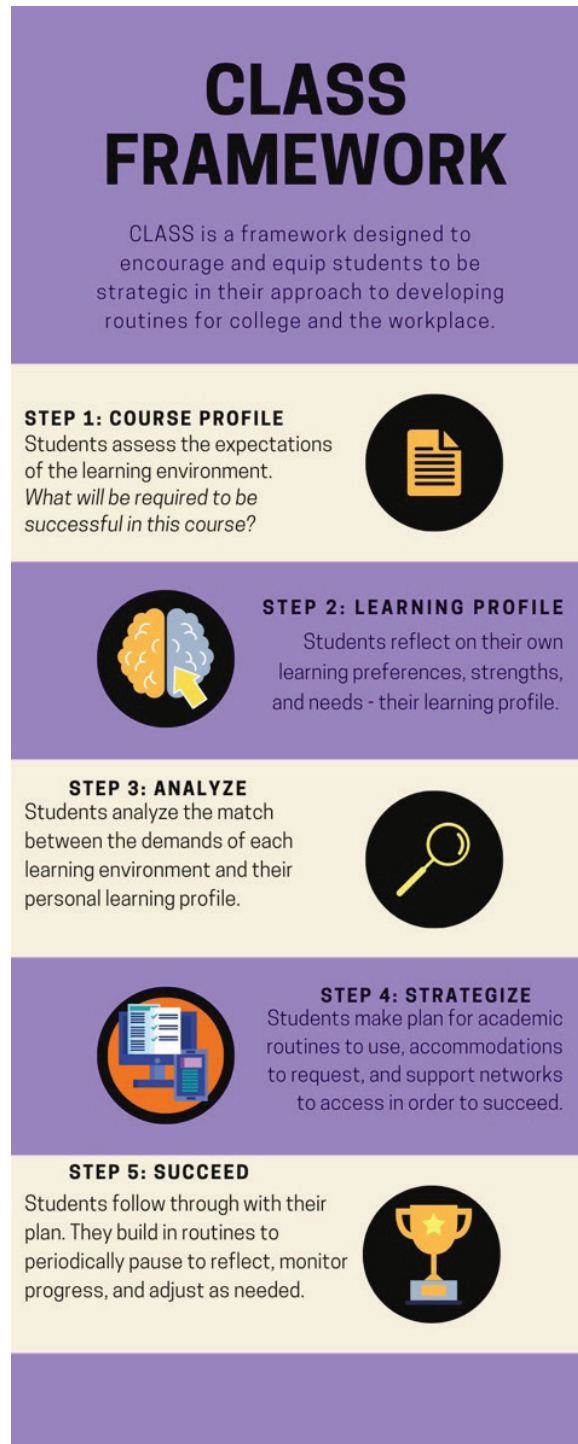
CLASS FOR THE COURSE LEVEL

The CLASS framework’s first area of focus is the transition from high school to college. Every college course is unique, and strategic students pay close attention to each course’s expectations at the start of each semester. Our first-year students learn to preview each course to determine course expectations, compare those expectations to their learning profile, make short-term and semester-long plans for success, and reflect upon and recalibrate their approach. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the letters of the CLASS acronym at this transition point relate to course-specific considerations.

Table 1
CLASS Framework: Course Level

Letter Description	Consideration
Course Profile	Students ask: “What is required for success in this course?” Considerations might include: course format, time commitment, pace/ volume of information, type of content, instructor style, assessment formats, methods of content presentation, reading materials, assignments, and grading structure.
Learning Profile	Students reflect on their learning preferences, strengths, and needs to build a strong understanding of their personal learning profile.
Analyze	Students utilize the information from the first two steps to compare the demands of each course to their learning profile and determine if there is a match. When the match is not ideal, students identify places where they will need to be proactive.
Strategize	Students plan what academic routines and support networks they will need for success in the course. For example, students might plan to find alternate material formats, adopt specific study routines, request accommodations, initiate study groups, find tutors, etc.
Succeed	The final step involves reflection and evaluation and emphasizes incremental successes while continuously evaluating and refining academic and support routines.

Figure 1
CLASS for the Course Level



CLASS FOR THE CURRICULUM LEVEL

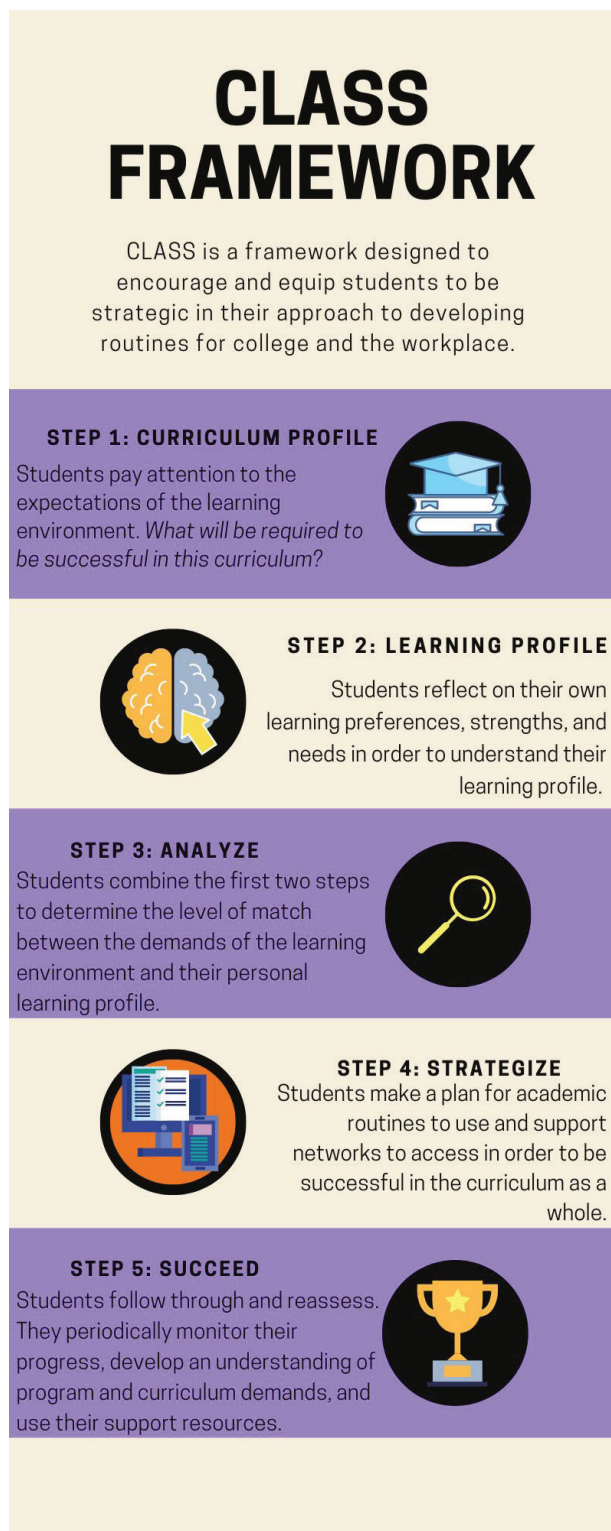
CLASS, applied on the curriculum level, uses a wider lens and is introduced to students once they have selected a major (i.e., second transition point). This stage encourages students to step back from the micro-level course analysis process and apply the same steps for macro-level planning. Students are guided to identify how their chosen degree curriculum helps them master specific competencies. They consult their advisors, faculty, and other resources to develop an understanding of the constructs, competencies, or expectations of their major (and future professional field) and create a plan to leverage opportunities to meet those competencies. Students are encouraged to anticipate connections and incremental learning as they align their major's competencies with components of their academic program. This approach makes in-class learning experiences more meaningful and helps students see how they can utilize high-impact practices (e.g., volunteer, field experiences, employment, internships, undergraduate research, and other opportunities) to enhance program learning experiences.

Table 2

CLASS Framework: Curriculum Level

Letter Description	Consideration
Curriculum Profile	Students ask: "What is required to succeed in this academic program" and "How can I maximize college opportunities to enhance my experience beyond the curriculum?" Considerations might include course load and curriculum requirements, experiential learning opportunities, entry/exit exams, GPA requirements, and program-specific academic expectations.
Learning Profile	Students should have a strong understanding of their learning profile, and they are encouraged to reflect on their learning preferences, strengths and needs as it applies to the broader curriculum and learning opportunities.
Analyze	Students consolidate information from the previous two steps to identify places where intentional effort is necessary to succeed in their chosen academic program.
Strategize	Students determine how to engage with various elements in their plan of study to leverage their strengths, address challenging areas, and facilitate growth. This may involve clustering courses, seeking internships or part-time work, planning for graduate school, etc.
Succeed	The macro-lens of this phase frames ongoing reflection and evaluation for long-term planning.

Figure 2
CLASS for the Curriculum Level



CLASS FOR THE CAREER LEVEL

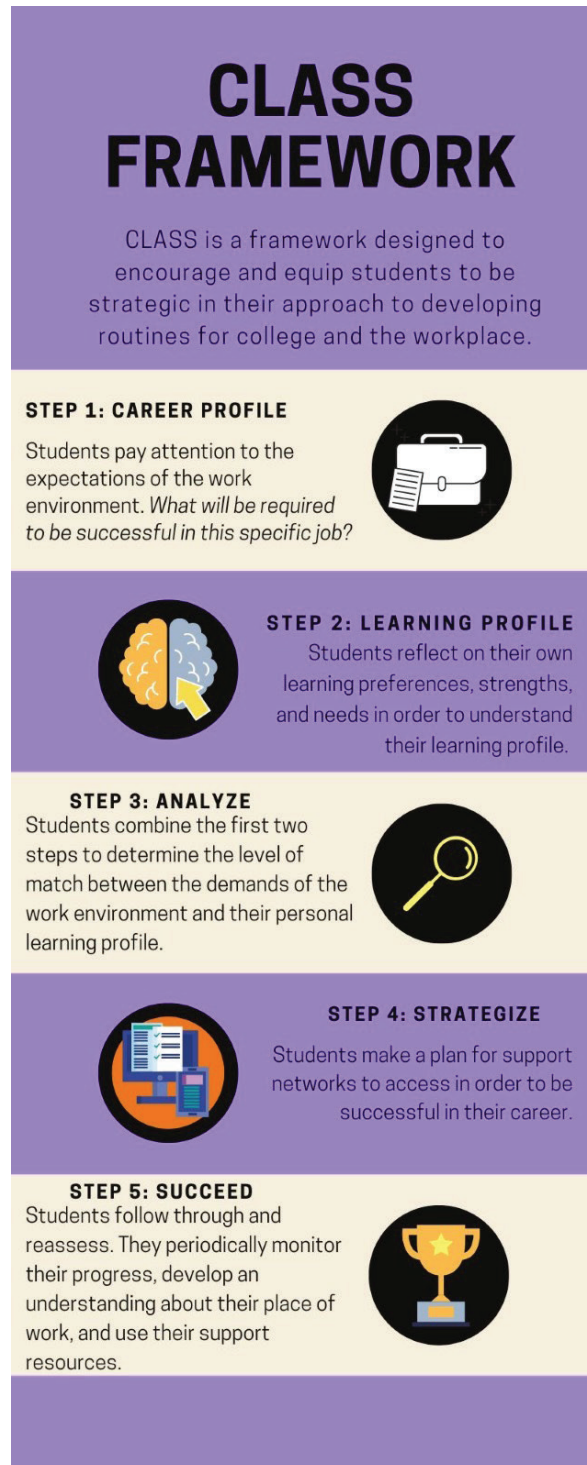
The framework's third element returns to a micro-level thought process. By now, the use of the CLASS framework in academic settings may be intuitive. However, students may need assistance applying this same proactive and strategic process in a work environment. Therefore, students are encouraged to practice doing so in job settings while still in college (e.g., campus jobs, part-time employment, internships, and co-ops). Once again, the major thought processes and prompts are relatively consistent, except for "C," which now points to the vocational setting (see Figure 3).

Table 3

CLASS Framework: Career Level

Letter Description	Consideration
Career Profile	The foundational question is, "What is required for success in <i>this job</i> ." Considerations include: company culture, information formats, expected work pace, deadlines, supervisor communication style and expectations, and physical work environment.
Learning Profile	Now, apply what they know about their learning profile to a new work environment.
Analyze	Assess the match between job demands and their learning profile by comparing information from the first two steps. This step encourages workers to identify areas where they need to be strategic and where they may excel in a new workplace.
Strategize	Determine success strategies, initiate dialogues with employers, or request necessary support for their work environment.
Succeed	This step reminds students to remain committed to ongoing growth and positive change.

Figure 3
CLASS for the Career Level



Conclusion

The CLASS framework is a useful way to codify micro- and macro-level strategic thinking that students can use as they transition through various academic milestones. Having a tangible strategy that can be emphasized (and re-emphasized) to students and applied in a variety of situations has enabled us to increase transparency regarding the rationale behind our student support program elements and expectations and allows us to concretely explain the fairly ambiguous concept of “being strategic” in new environments.

STEPP infuses CLASS throughout a multi-year student support program, but the framework is flexible enough to be used in multiple ways. Freshman seminar courses, bridge programs, Disability Support Services, mentoring services, and other common college support structures may find the model useful to adapt for students with SLD. We hope the CLASS framework will be helpful to others who support students with SLD in effectively and confidently navigating postsecondary transitions and achieving their learning and employment goals.

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