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Learning Centers

Grooming Students for Extra Edge

By ELAINE WOO,
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After an illuminating morning session with fellow campers in a Pitzer College classrooms at Claremont, soon-to-be high school freshman Eric Fagan, 14, was, in his own words, totally "stoked."

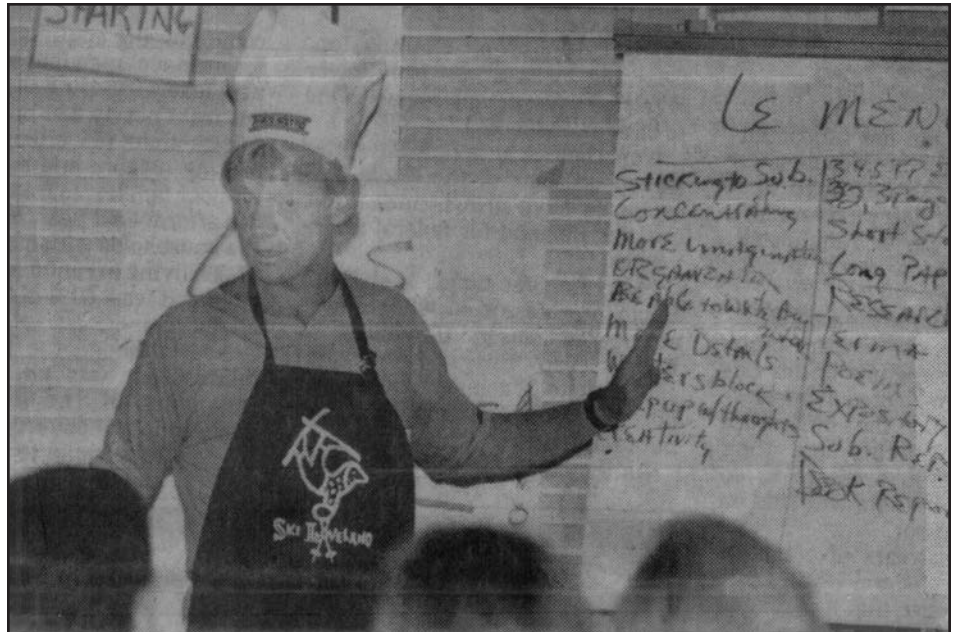
"I'm 48% kinesthetic and 49% visual!" the San Diego youngster exclaimed after taking a test that showed he absorbs information better by seeing and feeling it as opposed to hearing it.

The teen-ager was a participant in SuperCamp, an unusual—summer program for students seeking that extra edge to get ahead in school. Offering a combination of academic and confidence-building sessions in skills ranging from note-taking and speed reading to tightrope walking and tree climbing, it represents the latest wrinkle in an expanding, multi-million-dollar industry.

Thrive on Parents' Anxieties

Promising to raise students' grades and self-esteem, the proliferating learning centers and camps thrive on parents' anxieties about whether little Johnny or Jessica will make enough smarts to make it into a top-ranked college and succeed in life—and about whether public schools can adequately prepare them for the challenge.

In the expanding education-for-profit field, businesses range from special summer camps that offer to teach students how to learn—such as the Oceanside-based SuperCamp, which was founded in 1982 by Eric Jensen and Bobbi DePorter, holds its sessions on college campuses.



Richard Holicky dons chef's hat and apron to teach writing class at SuperCamp

According to DePorter, who owned a business school in Vermont before starting the camp, two out of three of the 35,000 teenagers who have gone through the program improved their grades by one letter grade and raised their SAT scores by an average of 70 points.

Workshops teach students tricks such as how to memorize 15 unrelated items in five minutes or cut their reading time in half through speed-reading. The curriculum is liberally sprinkled with jazzy pop terms such as "mind-mapping," an approach to note-taking that uses key words and pictures. Compared to its chief rival, SuperCamp places more emphasis on making learning fun.

During a recent morning session at Pitzer on writing for instance, teacher Richard Holicky passed out "magic pens"—ballpoint pens with different colors of ink—for a lesson on how to "cluster" ideas for an essay assignment.

Along the way, he tossed in a little pop psychology, pointing out to students that they use the "right brain" for brainstorming and the "left brain" for editing, revising

and rewriting. Midway through, an assistant turned up the stereo and, to the accompaniment of a rousing rock beat, the 20 high school students in the class stood up to stretch and change seats.

The program stresses personal as much as academic development, incorporating physically demanding exercises not designed for the faint-hearted, such as climbing 50-foot trees with ropes and leaping onto a trapeze. Such daunting tests are meant to help weak students develop self-confidence that they can apply to tackling schoolwork.

"You feel like you can conquer all your problems," said Ryan Ihly, 14 of Laguna Beach, who attends a prep school in Connecticut and whose ambition is to "go to Yale and be a Donald Trump."