Promising Practices

College for a Day

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field that are designed to promote the successful transition of adult basic education students from ABE/ESOL to postsecondary education.

Introduction

One way to encourage adult basic education (ABE) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students to see college as a next step in their educational journey is through a variety of simulated college experiences. This promising practice shares the lessons of two successful “College for a Day” programs located in different parts of the country: Massachusetts and Texas. Features common to both programs include students’ participation in classes taught by college professors, a catered lunch, guided tours, student panels, and information on admissions and financial aid. Each practice description includes tips to make College for a Day a valuable experience for adult students.

College for a Day at Northern Essex Community College

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Program Context

The System for Adult Basic Education and Support (SABES) was established by the Massachusetts Department of Education in 1990 to provide comprehensive training and technical assistance for adult educators and adult education programs. Services are provided through regional offices located on community college campuses and one university campus throughout Massachusetts. The program described here was offered through the SABES office located at Northern Essex Community College in northeastern Massachusetts.

The College for a Day program at Northeast SABES was inspired by Michele Sedor and Pat Mew, staff development specialists at SABES West, which is located at Holyoke Community College in Holyoke, MA. Their success in the western part of the state was the catalyst for this Northeast SABES effort.

Rationale and Background of the Practice

Research on adult learners and experiences shared by colleagues demonstrate that reducing fear of the unknown is an important step in a student’s decision to attend college. For students to succeed in college, they also need to know what is expected of them. College for a Day is a natural fit in meeting this need. When students come to the campus to take tours and participate in simulated classes, their fear of the unknown diminishes.

Description of the Practice

College for a Day is generally offered once a year, over the spring break in March. Scheduling it during this time allows college faculty to be involved, and classrooms are generally free. The full program usually runs between five and six hours and includes lunch.

Students start their day on campus by reviewing course descriptions and hearing from faculty about the courses that are available to sample that day. Each student gets to attend one sample class. We use a color-code system to help us with the registration process. If a given faculty member says he or she can take up to 15 students, we make 15 color-coded folders (yellow for radiology, for example) for that class. As students sign up for a class, each one receives a color-coded folder. When the folders run out, we know the class is full.

After registering for class and picking up their folders, students go to a room where college representatives from the admissions, student activity, career services, and financial aid offices are ready to share information with them. A video about the college plays in the background and academic departments display information. After some refreshments, the college president or vice president and the SABES staff welcome the students. Following a short review of the day’s agenda, students form groups according to the sample classes they registered to attend at the beginning of the day. Again the color-coding system is useful, as we direct students to the correct rooms based on the color of the folders they are holding.

Generally there are ten simultaneous sample class sessions. Each session lasts between an hour and a quarter and an hour and a half. These sessions offer a glimpse of the different types of courses students might take in college. Many of the sample class sessions include interesting hands-on learning activities. For example, an American Sign Language session includes a demonstration by a deaf teacher and a hearing-ear dog from the community. Another example of a sample class is presented by the nursing program. After watching a film on proper hand-washing procedures, students wash their hands and then put them under a black light to see the many untreated germs that remain. In the radiology session, students examine X-rays. Students in the biology session gather in the laboratory to make microscope slides. Students interested in technology get a basic word processing lesson and learn ways to effectively use Google from the SABES Technology Coordinator.
Other typical offerings at College for a Day include sessions on career planning, paramedic training, computers, allied health, travel, theatre, and English as a Second Language (ESL). Students attending the ESL session, which is taught by a traditional ESL/grammar teacher, can get a feel for what a college English class might be like. The psychology session covers career choices and stress management, and students also take the Holland interest test to learn how career interests can be matched up with a certain program of study at college.

At the end of the sample class session, an ambassador from the college’s Student Leadership Program or a SABES staff member arrives and leads the participants on a campus tour. We make sure the tour routes are coordinated so that participants circulate through the building without running into one another. During the tour, participants pick up a bag lunch and then everyone reassembles in a large room to eat.

Halfway through lunch, we present a panel discussion. The panel includes five to seven current college students who had transitioned from an ABE/ESOL program. The panel also includes representatives from adult education programs. The coordinator prepares some typical questions that College for a Day participants usually ask. Panelists share what life is like as a college student, and the College for a Day participants laugh with the panelists. They say, “These guys were just like me a few years ago. If they can do it, so can I.” This can help reassure participants who may be nervous about going to college.

After the panel discussion, we bring College for a Day to a close and thank the participants for attending.

**Staffing**

SABES staff are responsible for coordinating everything; however, people from the student activities office help out by offering their Student Leadership Program members. These college students give a lot of assistance as volunteer ambassadors. They volunteer as a part of their community service effort. Also, an employee from the admissions office helps SABES coordinate the day.

For the registration process, five to seven people are needed. In addition, one person is needed to make sure participants know where to go. One tour guide is needed for each group of fifteen students. We also need one to two people to help distribute the food at lunch.

The biggest challenges are making the scheduling decisions and getting faculty and staff to commit to participating. It is wise to ask staff and faculty right after the event if they will participate next time. Usually they say, “Yes, let me know when you are doing it again.” Asking right after the event increases the likelihood that faculty and staff will agree to do this again next time.

**Implementation Steps**

There are many logistics to consider. It is important to figure out how to get participants to the campus. Carpooling is one good option. Some participants may come by themselves. Knowing students’ transportation needs ahead of time is helpful. For example, one year we provided a bus to pick up participants coming by commuter rail. No one used it.

It is important to make sure there is enough food and that all the equipment is working ahead of time. We determine who on campus is responsible for setting up the rooms, podium and sound system. Find out when they need to know the seating arrangement and equipment plans.

If the college campus is spread out, it is good to try to keep students in a centralized location where events can be concentrated. And since most participants will be new to a college campus, it is helpful to plan for extra signage to keep them pointed in the right direction.

It is useful to gather materials on College for a Day for the ABE/ESOL teachers whose students will be participating. Ask these teachers to give students some activities before College for a Day as a way to help them prepare. Two easy examples are doing a word search on a map of the campus to find campus offices or buildings, and having students go online to look up information about the college. This builds interest in College for a Day, and the teachers become more invested as well. Also, provide teachers with a folder with materials to help them guide their students’ reflections about experiences after they return from College for a Day.

Other planning questions include: How will we keep people moving? What do we want participants to absolutely see? How do we want the rooms arranged? How will the seats be set up? What kind of sessions are going to be most appropriate? How can we get former or current ABE students to talk at the panel discussion? What are the special needs of a night program or a day program? Answering these questions involves careful record-keeping (e.g., whom we spoke to and when) and patience. It is important to have one point person to make sure college representatives are not getting different information from several different people. We try to build rapport with staff in the various college departments as we plan College for a Day.

**Challenges and Solutions**

For this program to work well, it is important to know an approximate attendance number in order to plan class sessions, lunch, tours, room arrangements and materials. But just because a student signs up for College for a Day does not mean that he or she will actually attend. This reality is a challenge that is constantly in the back of our minds. One way to address this challenge is to not distribute the list of available sample class sessions until just a few days before College for a Day.

Another issue is when to have participants sign up for the course they’d like to sample. The first time we held College for a Day, we had participants pre-register for the sample classes, but a large percentage of students who pre-registered did not show up for the event. So we switched to same-day in-person registration on a first-come-first-serve basis.

It’s also important to determine ahead of time any constraints on the number of participants that can attend a particular session. It is wise to ask staff and faculty right after the event if they will participate next time. Usually they say, “Yes, let me know when you are doing it again.” Asking right after the event increases the likelihood that faculty and staff will agree to do this again next time.
sample class session. For example, the radiology classroom has a limited amount of equipment for the participants to use, which limits the number of people who can sign up for this session.

The first time we held College for a Day, we led tours of the building before the sample classes. We learned, however, that the tours created a little bit of disorganization that made it difficult to get everyone from the tour to the classes on time. As a result, the tours are now offered after the sample classes.

Another change we’ve made is to only offer one sample class session slot. Originally, we scheduled two 45-minute sample classes. But we found that 45 minutes for a sample class session was not enough. We now schedule one single sample class that lasts for one hour and fifteen minutes or one hour and thirty minutes. It limits choices, but gives students a deeper experience.

Finally, staffing is always a major challenge for the event. There are never enough people to staff it.

Cost & Funding

It costs about $5,000 to hold a College for a Day program. The basic budget is determined by how much we need to pay faculty and staff for the day, and also by which expenses can be covered by the college. We offer participating faculty a $150 honorarium and non-student staff are paid $50 for the day. Each student panelist receives a stipend of $20. Also, significant expense is involved in copying materials, and buying labels and folders.

Catering lunch can be expensive if we go through the college’s dining service. We reduce costs by bringing in juice, drinks, and cookies purchased elsewhere. Also, we keep lunch simple: a few sandwich choices along with chips, fruit and cookies. We also solicited catering bids from outside vendors, making sure to get a dated, itemized price quote from each one. By doing this, we found that the campus-based catering service charged three times as much as a third-party catering firm.

As for raising funds, we investigated sources connected with the college’s activities and mission. Northern Essex Community College has a Title V grant. Funding for College for a Day came from this grant by providing student participant statistics. It was important that we provide the college with as many exact figures as is possible. The first year, College for a Day received $1,500 in Title V funding for meals. The second year, we received $2,500. Another way to raise funds is to collect raffle items from the various student activities and hold a raffle during lunch.

Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness

As of now, we rely mainly on anecdotal evidence of the impact of College for a Day. ABE/ESOL programs regularly ask when the next College for a Day is planned. Program staff often remark that College for a Day is one of the best experiences for adult education students and that their students love it. Also, we learn from teachers that their ABE/ESOL students who attended College for a Day have gone on to enroll in the college.

We do maintain statistics by program, city, and how many are in GED and ESOL programs, but we need a better way to formally document the effectiveness and impact of College for a Day. It might be useful to hold a follow-up session with participating programs a week or two after the event. At such a session, we could talk with the participants and have them fill out a written evaluation with a five-tier rating system for the various aspects of the program.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

Once a College for a Day program is institutionalized, it is important to document how many faculty and staff participate. This allows the host college to show how its resources are used to serve the community and to help fulfill its mission. By showing positive outcomes for learners, an event like College for a Day can help ABE/ESOL programs document what they are doing to help learners achieve their next educational step.

Implications for policy are determined by the college’s level of ownership of College for a Day. It is important to demonstrate that this is about more than recruiting students. Anything that promotes lifelong learning in the community needs to be supported by policy.

College for a Day is not just a way to help students reach the immediate goal of getting a GED. It is a way for students to open doors to their future and a chance for them to network. It may be interesting to look at the impact of this practice by looking at different College for a Day models and best practices. Traditionally, attending college is connected with a high school network or path. If most of your students are non-traditional, there is a large need that is filled with wonderful events like College for a Day. It is both a lot of work and a lot of fun.

College for a Day at Austin Community College

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Program Context

College for a Day at Austin Community College (ACC) is an extension of the college’s Adult Education to College Connection Program, which brings ACC recruiters and advisors to Adult Education (AE) classrooms in the community to help students
with the college enrollment process. These representatives help students attend college presentations, fill out the ACC application, complete the electronic financial aid application, and register for college courses. College for a Day takes these services one step further by bringing students to the campus.

In 2006 the transition of AE students to college became a key area of focus for ACC President Stephen B. Kinslow. The ACC Board of Trustees has made a big financial commitment to the College’s adult education program, and they view the transitioning of AE students to postsecondary education as a return on this investment. Dr. Kinslow is thrilled with College for a Day, as it fits well with the Texas’s Closing the Gaps Initiative.

The target audience for College for a Day includes advanced-level ESL students and intermediate-to-advanced level GED students who are finishing their adult education studies within the fiscal year.

Rationale and Background of the Practice

College for a Day was motivated by a presentation at the 2007 Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) conference, sponsored by the National College Transition Network, by Janet Fischer of Northern Essex Community College in Massachusetts.

Description of the Practice

College for a Day is held in November, on the Friday before the Thanksgiving break. This helps with scheduling free classrooms and faculty time, because relatively few classes are held on Friday.

The day begins with Dr. Kinslow welcoming students to the College. Students then attend a college success workshop similar to the one provided for incoming ACC students. Two hands-on sessions follow the workshop. Then participants gather for lunch. During lunch, staff members from the Student Life Office give a presentation to encourage students to think about being a “whole student.” They encourage students to go beyond attending classes to join clubs and to participate in other activities. The financial aid advisor also speaks to the students at lunch.

After lunch a student panel consisting of four students who had transitioned from a GED program into college share their lessons. One talks about how important it is to complete the GED, one explains the financial aid process, one discusses how to choose classes, and one speaks about being a college student at ACC. Our visiting ABE/ESL students will ask the panelists very specific questions: How did students decide on a program? How hard was it to complete the GED? Who helped you in making your decisions? One of the themes from the panel discussion is how helpful the recruiters-advisors are in this transition process. They stay in contact with the students even after AE program completion.

Implementation

Because the Adult Education to College Connection Program is a part of ACC, and College for a Day is strongly supported by the Dr. Kinslow, departments readily agreed to participate.

Still, careful planning really pays off. It makes a big difference and it does take time. As Janet Fischer suggested at her presentation, it is important to think through every movement of the day. Have people posted everywhere to give directions to make sure students knew where to go. It is important to look very professional to the students. Drive home the point that this day is for them and they are the center of our attention.

Keep it manageable. In planning the first ACC College for a Day, three departments were identified because of the good relationships I have with each one: Health Sciences, Continuing Education and Computer Information Technology. As a way to engage them, I made a presentation to the department deans early in the semester. This timing gave them plenty of time to decide whether to participate. Each department received copies of the materials I received at Janet Fischer’s presentation. The deans were assured that their involvement in planning would be minimal (and it was).

Marketing the event is important. Adult education staff visit the ABE/ESOL classes to pass out “Save-the-Date” cards and give an overview of the program. As the event approaches, they go back to the classes with registration forms. Students are encouraged to complete them that day. Both activities are helpful in getting an early commitment from the students. Also, the ACC marketing department designed the marketing materials and the logo for the staff T-shirts. It is interesting to see how enthusiastic the marketing department staffers are about promoting the event.

The sessions are well received by the students because they are hands-on and an interesting variety is offered. Participants can choose to attend two out of twelve workshops. Several of the health science programs participate, giving students an opportunity to see and touch everything in the laboratories. In the “Walk the Talk” session, students learn how to take a person’s blood pressure. Students also can have a lot of fun in the floral industry class, students make a floral arrangement to take home. In the Animal Tech presentation, students learn how to do CPR on a dog. The computer programming session is so popular that the instructor needs a larger-than-usual room to accommodate all the students.

We try to show the college leadership that this is a marketing opportunity, and something they will be doing for the community. After all, colleges do these types of events all the time for high school students. AE students ought to have their own day to experience life on a college campus.

College for a Day is now an annual practice at ACC. Planning is under way to extend invitations to the AE providers in the area to have their students attend our event, or to coordinate an event on their own.

Challenges and Solutions

A big challenge is getting an accurate idea of how many students will attend. At our first College for a Day, the pre-registered students maxed out all the classes, and it was not clear if everyone could be accommodated. But only 60 percent of the students who pre-registered actually attended. We were holding places in classes for students that never showed up, and there were slots that could have been offered to other GED providers in the area.
showed up, and these were slots that could have been offered to other GED providers in the area.

Although we tried to carefully pre-qualify students, some who were not on track to complete their program in that same fiscal year did end up attending. And some participants had a very low English proficiency, which made communication a challenge.

The big overall challenge is targeting the right students. How do you get the people who will benefit the most to participate? At the same time, how do you convince other students that this is an annual event and they will have an opportunity to come when they are closer to completing their programs?

Cost and Funding
The AE program at ACC does not have dedicated money set aside right now for College for a Day. Additional funding may come along in the future. Luckily, there are institutional funds to pay for a bulk of the expenses. Also, a local restaurant picked up 50 percent of the cost of the food, and the Student Services Department bought drinks and morning snacks. Several staff members did a great job at soliciting door prizes from area stores and restaurants. The marketing department gave their time to create the marketing materials. Since this AE program is a part of ACC, there is not a charge for the space. Since College for a Day gives the departments a chance to "show off their program," they agreed to pay faculty salaries for the time that faculty spend on College for a Day. Faculty also get a free lunch and a t-shirt.

Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness
It's still too early to determine this practice's impact and effectiveness. A lot of the students who attend express a strong interest in transitioning to ACC. We have plans to follow up with the students to see if they have successfully transitioned. Some of the departments indicated they will follow up with students who attend their sessions to answer any additional questions.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Research
As AE providers are under increasing pressure to prepare students to transition to college level work, it is important to develop relationships with your local postsecondary institution. At ACC, departments are beginning to see the importance of providing the same college planning support to AE students as they provide to high school students. Colleges need to broaden their outreach, and College for a Day is a concrete way to do that.

ACC has done a great job over the past several years in making sure AE students have the information they need to make decisions about attending college, choosing a program of study, and registering for classes. Boosting the academic readiness of AE students is the next initiative shared by the Adult Education Department and other departments at ACC. There is a gap between GED completion and college readiness. This gap results in students spending too much time and money in developmental classes. Some of these students become discouraged and do not persist to degree attainment.

Implementing a College for a Day program can be as simple or as involved as necessary. One approach is to start small, perhaps with student visits to a single program at the college. Or, have a college recruiter visit an adult education program. Then expand the activities to a campus-wide event.