Promising Practices

Memorandum of Understanding

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

Contributed by
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Rationale and Background of the Practice

Why did you institute the practice?

When I assumed my position as Executive Director here at Dorcas Place, there was little focus on helping students enter college; the GED was the end goal. I had worked in TRIO programs and knew how important postsecondary education was for our students’ future. When we surveyed our students in 2000, only half of the 100 students enrolled at that time said they intended to continue their studies after passing the GED test. I wanted to raise our students’ aspirations and help them realize that they, too, could go to college.

When we decided we wanted to go forward with a college preparatory program, we wanted to make sure we had a commitment from the local college that our students would be most likely to attend: the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI). We tried to achieve that by creating a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with CCRI (sample MOA).

All of our students are adults with low incomes, and 99 percent are the first generation of their family bound for college. They don’t know how to maneuver in the college system and don’t have family members who can help them with that process. I wanted to ensure that our students had the support services they needed at college. It was important for them to have a sense of belonging. It’s a difficult transition for most of them. The MOA helped to ensure that support.

What information or research did you draw on in choosing this practice?

We drew on Vincent Tinto’s research on conditions that support college student retention. His framework for student retention calls for collaborative efforts between faculty, staff and administrators. Tinto stressed that “students persist when they find themselves in settings that hold high expectations for their learning, are provided academic and social support and are actively involved in learning” (Tinto, 2003). Tinto is a strong advocate of building learning communities.

When and how did the practice begin? How has it evolved?

In 2000, we secured a grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and subsequently a private anonymous donation. These funds enabled us to establish the Bridge to College transition program. We decided to spend part of the grant money on staff salaries and mentor stipends. In addition, we envisioned that as part of the transition program, students would take one course at CCRI. But this would have disqualified the students for federal financial aid, since with only one class they would not qualify as half-time students. So we directed some of the grant money toward covering the cost of the CCRI course for each of the students.

Based on the results of Tinto’s research, we wanted our students to take the CCRI course as a group in order for them to create their own learning community. So, we had all students take the same three-credit course, Psychology of Personal Adjustment, together. The class consisted entirely of students from Dorcas Place.

Feedback from students indicated that they wanted more choice in course offerings, and also that some felt isolated from the other college students and wanted to take courses with them. So, we now purchase seats for groups of at least five students in three different courses. This arrangement is now in effect for our daytime students. The evening class is still made up entirely of Dorcas Place students, anywhere between eight and fifteen students per semester.

Description of the Practice

How do you implement the practice?

I wanted to make sure we had a solid commitment from CCRI so I started at the top and approached the president of the college. I got him to sign the MOA, and made a big deal of it. We organized a formal signing ceremony at the college, brought our students over, took pictures, and sent them to the president with a thank-you letter. I did not want him to forget about our students.

We have continued to involve the president at every opportunity. It’s important to nurture this relationship continuously. I always invite him to speak at our graduations, and we also invite other key staff from CCRI. By now, all the key people at CCRI know that the president of the college supports our collaboration. When our staff calls up Admissions or Student Services, the CCRI staff responds to us.

We also build our own relationships with the faculty at the college. We introduce ourselves and, with our students’ permission, explain that some of their students have transitioned from Dorcas Place. These relationships enable us to
advocate for our students more effectively.

While we do pay for the students’ first course as well as their books and some other materials, we wanted to guarantee that our students could enroll in the federally funded TRIO support services program to receive counseling, tutoring, and mentoring to ensure student retention. We also secure workshops on library services, resume writing, and so forth for our students. Our doors at Dorcas Place are also always open for the students who have transferred to college. Many come back to use our computer lab. Sometimes they have a good relationship with our case manager here and want to maintain that relationship.

Originally, the MOA was designed to secure services for our students, but it has become much more than that. We now use it as a mechanism to help us select faculty and courses for our students at CCRI. I meet with the Dean of Academic Affairs to consider what courses we might want to offer next semester. While the MOA specifies that all courses will be taught by faculty selected by the college, we look for faculty who can work with nontraditional adult learners. We’ve even used the MOA to express our dissatisfaction with faculty who were holding our students to lower standards than other students. It’s a disservice to our students if the professors have lower expectations of them—for example, accepting papers that are not typed or are turned in late. Our MOA states that faculty resumes, course syllabi, and other relevant materials will be made available to Dorcas Place staff once classes begin. That allows us to align our preparatory classes at Dorcas Place with the specific college classes that the students will be taking.

As a byproduct of the relationship we’ve built with the college, they’ve been helping us to track our students, even though it’s not specified in the MOA. Another new development is that we are just starting to negotiate an MOA with Johnson & Wales, a private university with career-focused degree programs. They have many training programs that our students are looking for.

**What steps would a program or practitioner need to follow to replicate the practice?**

Make sure you develop a relationship with key people in Admissions, Academic Affairs, Financial Aid and the President’s Office. Those relationships require constant nurturing. For example, we hold a luncheon for them at the college a few times a year where they meet our students who are attending classes at the college.

Having a grant to buy seats in a course gives us bargaining power. I’ve found that many private funders are interested in supporting college transition programs. It costs us $10,000 for 30 students to take one class per semester. Our grant funds also pay for the books and materials like calculators. Sometimes we get donations of refurbished computers from businesses that we give to our college students. Those are fairly easy to secure and they make a big difference for the students.

**Challenges**

**What challenges has the program encountered in implementing this practice?**

Most postsecondary institutions still have a long way to go to accommodate our students’ needs in terms of scheduling, transportation, and access to financial aid regardless of immigration status. Many of our students are not transitioning to college after the first class due to family and work obligations. We still need to figure out how to support low-income adults who have multiple barriers to college participation. I worry that colleges with diminishing budgets and competing needs won’t provide for our students because they need intensive support services at every transition point.

**Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness**

**What have been the advantages and outcomes of this practice?**

When I first signed the MOA, the president of CCRI told me to call him when our first student was getting ready to graduate so that I could stand on the stage to hand out the diploma. In 2003, I took him up on his offer and handed diplomas to two of our students as they walked across the stage. This president would not have extended this offer to me had we not built a relationship with him and his college over the years—by then, he knew we had a credible program.

**Do you have actual evidence of its effectiveness?**

In fall 2004 we transitioned 22 students to college, of whom 60 percent completed the first course. This high rate of success indicates to us we know what works in helping students transition to college and complete the course.

**Reference**