Promising Practices

Orientation

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.

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Rationale and Background of the Practice

Why did you institute the practice?
To run a successful college transition program, we needed a way to develop a sense of community and trust in the classroom in a very short period of time. We also needed to address the emotional and psychological barriers that can undermine students’ success in the transition program and in college. We wanted to find a way to help students begin to change certain negative perceptions they might have about themselves and about college.

Many GED students have anxiety and a low sense of self-efficacy when it comes to academic work. Some don’t feel that they are smart, and they think that college is going to make them smart. We need to help students change those perceptions, to recognize that they already have the intelligence to pursue college. It’s true that college will give them more information and a broader perspective, but we want them to see that they have already demonstrated that they have the ability to succeed in college.

At the same time, many students have poor time-management skills and misconceptions regarding who goes to college, and many don’t have a large support system to help support them as students.

We developed an orientation program that would begin to address all of these issues: Build a strong cohort, provide students with a clear and comprehensive overview of the academic and social goals of the college transition program, and build motivation for success in the program and in college.

What information or research did you draw on in choosing this practice?
I drew on the 10 years of experience that I and the other SUCCESS staff members have working with GED students and the work I have done studying adult learning. I have a background in corporate training. From that experience, I know that it is important to present information in the correct order and at the right moment to achieve a successful training experience. I use a video, The Business of Paradigms, which I used in a corporate training. The video is very powerful and helps students examine the importance of being able to change in order to grow.

The orientation is itself a source of on-going research. We record students' issues and reflections during the orientation and we use that information as we evaluate the success of each cohort. It’s like a living laboratory; we are constantly re-evaluating the model.

When and how did the practice begin? How has it evolved?
We have been running a program orientation since the program started in January 2002. At first, we tried doing everything in one day. That was too rushed and did not give the students a chance to relax and develop a sense of comfort and community.

We also decided to provide nice meals. We really wanted to communicate that we felt the students were special and that we wanted to reward their willingness to participate in the college transition program.

This year all of our transition students will be dually enrolled in our program and at Cape Cod Community College. This is a major step for the program. The students will participate in the college’s orientation as well as the SUCCESS orientation. So, we are still evolving.

Description of the Practice

How do you implement the practice?
You need students to commit to two days—basically 10 hours of program orientation. A two-day agenda could look like this:

Day One

- Ice breaker / community-building activity.
- Introductions from students and program staff, including all of the teachers, the counselors, and the program secretaries.
• Group activity designed to have each student articulate what he or she will need to feel comfortable and to thrive in the classroom.

• Catered lunch. Students can talk with college staff in a comfortable, informal setting.

• Video, such as *The Business of Paradigms*, or an equivalent video or activity designed to address the issues that surround the importance of being able to make life changes.

• Homework assignment:
  - Write a paragraph on what you need to feel comfortable in the class.

**Day Two**

• Activity based on the homework.

• Time-management activity. Students are given a planner provided by the college. They review the planner that includes information on all of the services offered at the college. Students put the SUCCESS program's calendar directly into the planner. Students will be required to bring the planner with them to each class.

• Catered lunch. Program graduates that are currently attending Cape Cod Community College join the students and share their experiences.

• Review the program's syllabus and the materials students will need for the class.

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

Dedicate enough time to accommodate all of the activities that take place during the orientation. There must be a staff member who is familiar with a number of community-building activities and can facilitate group interaction. This staff person must have the time in his or her job to organize the activities and to contact the college staff and the former students. Additional staff members must participate and support the orientation. You also should have a budget for good food.

**What are the staffing and staff skill requirements?**

Along with the staff skills mentioned above, adult education experience is essential, much more so than experience with college teaching. The staff really needs to understand the needs of this population. You have to be able to introduce complex and difficult concepts, but also simplify them and break them into manageable units.

You need a staff that has the time to communicate with each other on an on-going basis; a staff that thinks about the student as a whole person and works as a team. We constantly modify the orientation and other aspects of our program based on our discussions of our students' successes and challenges.

**Challenges**

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

The challenge is always the amount of time it takes to organize and facilitate the orientation with limited resources.

**Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness**

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

The orientation definitely creates a strong sense of community and enthusiasm among the students. They are excited about the work to come. They build a support system for one another that will continue to develop, one that is supported and nurtured throughout the semesters. The students bring the planners and that they received in the orientation to each class, which helps with organization and with the students' sense of being responsible for their own learning.

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

It is hard to isolate the effectiveness of the orientation as opposed to other aspects of the program. Although it's anecdotal, after each orientation at least one student emerges as the class "mother," the person who takes on the responsibility of being in touch with everyone in class. We have seen this happen every semester we have run the program. This is the student who checks up on the classmate who isn't in class. This is the student who tends to take on the responsibility of staying in contact with their fellow program graduates and then writing the updates for our alumni newsletter, *SUCCESSFUL TIMES*.

Although many factors influence a student's retention in the program, the SUCCESS program has consistently high rates of student completion and transition to Cape Cod Community College. We see these groups of students continue to support each other when they get to the college campus. Students come back to us and tell us that they do stay in touch with one another and share information, such as the quality of their college instructors.

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