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ABSTRACT

Getting the most out of a managed enrollment classroom

By *Kate Hyzer and Heidi Haupt*

Starting and running a classroom under a managed enrollment model offers many opportunities for both teachers and students. By managing the flow of new students to only a few times per year, students and teachers can set clear curriculum goals with shared responsibility for keeping the class moving toward those goals. In addition, many students value the structure of the classes that are more similar to college than to open-ended high school classes. This article shares the experiences of a program that adopted managed enrollment.

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ARTICLE BEGINS NEXT PAGE

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Lutheran Settlement House is a large social service organization that has served Philadelphia since 1902. The adult education program was founded over 30 years ago to meet the needs of the women who lived near LSH and were searching for opportunities beyond the dwindling careers in neighborhood factories. Today LSH serves around 1,200 adult learners every year. This rich, long history gives teachers a heritage of student-driven classrooms and openness to new ideas for meeting students' needs. One of the most recent and very successful experiments was to try managed enrollment cycles.

At LSH "managed enrollment" means new students are welcomed into classrooms during four two-week periods throughout the year, and for the rest of the year classrooms are closed and students focus on specific skills and goals. In the two years since this model was piloted, several other aspects of the model have been developed. All students throughout the program are posttested at the midpoint of the cycle to help determine if they will stay at the same level class or can transfer to a higher-level class. And, for fun, every cycle ends with a celebration: graduation, prom, holiday party, read-a-thon, or barbecue.

LSH moved to this model to respond to concerns of teachers and students. Teachers were exhausted by constant turnover in students, struggling to consistently capture students' goals and posttests, and reestablishing classroom rules and norms. Some students also wrote into satisfaction surveys that constantly adding new classmates was distracting. Students noticed that it challenged teachers to make multipart lesson plans and homework meaningful for all students, even when some of them were new that day. Most importantly, students had a hard time visualizing where their daily classroom work was taking them without a clear map from the first day of class through to their GED. In the spirit of experimentation, we tried managed enrollment.

What worked

Under managed enrollment, teachers had the ability to implement some of the techniques that had seemed too difficult under open enrollment. Students seemed to respond to the new structure with more focus and a greater sense of community. Here are some of the ways our managed enrollment classrooms looked and operated differently than open enrollment classrooms.

Curriculum

Under open enrollment, lesson plans had to be able to stand alone and be digestible to long-time students and students on their first day of class. With managed enrollment, students are given a course outline, syllabus, or at least a topic list that lets them know what the class will cover and in what order. This sharing of information actually helped transfer

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ownership of the class's progress from the teacher to the whole class. Students understood that many skills grew upon each other, and they worked harder to master basic skills in preparation for more advanced ones.

Homework

Even under the best-planned class, adults still face responsibilities outside of the classroom that prevent them from completing homework. That challenge aside, under managed enrollment our students understood better how homework would help them keep up with the rest of the class. Also, they knew that everyone else in the class was responsible for the same homework. It was no longer a good assumption that students could skip homework and know that the teacher would circle around to get them and the new students up to speed with those who did their homework.

Classroom environment

With an enrollment pattern that is more similar to college than high school, students responded with more focus and less classroom disturbances. At the beginning of new enrollment cycles, veteran students conveyed classroom rules to new students, which helped foster a sense of responsibility for students and strengthened the classroom community.

Student outcomes

As students fell into the structure of the class and became accustomed to the presence of their classmates, testing distractions decreased. Students knew when to expect to be tested and were *less anxious*. In higher-level classes, a wonderful sense of shared goals led to groups traveling together to register for GED classes and checking with each other to find out if their classmates were passing tests. In lower- and intermediate-level classes, students often were transferred to higher-level classes with at least some of their classmates. This decreased their fear of a new classroom setting and made transfers easier for all.

Teacher professional development

Much like the students benefited from a curriculum plan, the teachers did too. If the Professional Development Center offered a workshop on a topic that was coming up in class, teachers were more likely to go to the workshop. Also, with a plan, teachers did much more collaboration. Teachers held a monthly "lesson plan café" where they shared lesson plans and ideas in a friendly peer-oriented environment. Finally, it was much easier to cover when a colleague was out sick. Sometimes teachers followed similar curricula so they could support each other and sometimes teachers follow opposite curricula so that students could pick and choose which classes they needed most.

System weaknesses

Though managed enrollment has created many positive opportunities for teachers and students to achieve goals, there are a couple of weaknesses in the system. As with all difficult goals, many students need to stop attending classes to deal with other issues in their lives. Under an open enrollment model, there was constant balancing pressure between arriving and departing students. With managed enrollment, the last few weeks of a session can be lonely. In general, average length of attendance is longer, but most people drop off

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around the same time, toward the end of a session. Secondly, we have learned over time to be somewhat flexible about letting students into classes. We've found that in classes with higher dropout rates sometimes it is necessary to bring in new students in the middle of the term. We try not to do this more than once, but we do have to be open to it.

Based on our experience

So if you or your agency are thinking about trying managed enrollment, here are some suggestions to make the most of your class:

- *Share your grand plan.* Our students loved knowing about and being responsible for keeping the class moving.
- *Adopt multi-part lesson plans.* It was much easier with a consistent group of students.
- *Let your experienced students orient new students and maintain classroom norms.* It's more fun to teach than to constantly reinforce classroom rules.
- *Do not be afraid to posttest or set goals as a group.* Our students enjoyed feeling the whole group was setting goals and suffering through tests together.
- End sessions with a celebration. After a long session of work, we all look forward to reflecting on our achievements and celebrating.