

Looking Through the Window

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The Issue

As the counselor at the Culver City Adult School, I do all the intake evaluations and class placements for new and returning students. I meet with new students for approximately 20 to 30 minutes to identify their goal of either a GED or high school diploma, request transcripts, and tentatively choose a class so that they can get started. They then are enrolled in the program. It is at this point that the system seems to break down for so many students. Sometimes they never even make it back to begin the class. Other students start, but attend only for a short time before disappearing.

My colleagues and I have had numerous discussions about what might help more students transition successfully back into school and persist with their learning until their goals are met. The question of what happens to so many students who sign up for either GED preparation or high school diploma classes and then just disappear after one day or one week or one month is perplexing and frustrating, to say the least.

It is out of this situation that the idea of an orientation class grew. A casual conversation with the principal at our school regarding mandatory orientation aroused my curiosity again.

The Inquiry Question

What would happen if I implemented a mandatory orientation class before starting students in classes?

Action

Discussions with staff and students as well as reading research on learner persistence informed my thinking about what the content of the orientation class could be. The curriculum that I developed consisted of 16 sections divided over the two, three-hour sessions. Topics included classroom procedures, program options, study skills, test taking skills, goal setting, and time management.

Data Collection

Students answered brief questionnaires about their goals, fears, and questions regarding participating in the program at the beginning of the orientation and again at the completion of the class. After the second

session, I also asked evaluative questions about the orientation. Additionally, I met with individual students after a few weeks in the program to see how they were doing in the classroom. In a conversational format, I spoke to them at length about school, their feelings about school, and how they felt the orientation either did or did not help them in their endeavors in school.

Findings and Conclusions

Although it is sometimes difficult to get students to critique the program, their positive comments about the orientation class sounded honest and heartfelt. In general, the majority of students who attended the orientation class appreciated the information presented and the opportunity to spend some time reflecting on their goals with regard to education and the rest of their lives. Many felt it was good to take the orientation class before starting their academic work because it helped them know what to expect and what was expected of them.

From my perspective as counselor, a benefit of the orientation class was the opportunity it gave me to gain a much deeper understanding of, and build a stronger relationship with, students than is usually possible during the 20- or 30-minute intake interview. I feel a close bond with students who participated in the orientation, and that has been extremely positive. They stop by my office much more often than do the students who were not involved in this project. As their counselor, I believe I understand their individual circumstances much better than I do those of many other students.

Of the 43 students who attended either one or both of the orientation sessions, 36 (84 percent) continued on to start their classes at the Independent Learning Center (ILC), 4 (9 percent) attended briefly, and 26 (60 percent) attended regularly. Comparing these numbers with a random group of 43 students who had registered in the winter and spring of 2005, 34 (79 percent) actually started their classes in the ILC, 8 (19 percent) attended briefly, and 19 (44 percent) attended regularly. It appears that the number of students who actually started from the group who attended either one or both of the orientation sessions is only slightly higher than the random group. However, among those who participated in the orientation, regular attendance was significantly higher than that of a random sample of those who had not participated in the orientation. Additionally, orientation participants were significantly less likely to attend only briefly. Those who attended both orientation sessions had better attendance than those who came to just one.

As a counselor who talks to students every day, I believe that decisions to return to and to persist in school occur as a result of some kind of epiphany on the part of the student. I repeatedly hear from students who come to school regularly and are driven to complete their classes

that one day they realized that “I just need finally to do this.” This often occurs when they bump up against a wall with regard to getting a job, or their children have reached school age and they want to help them with their school work, or they are concerned about the example they set for their children, or they are tired of being embarrassed about having dropped out. Whatever the reason—the motivation is different for every student—it is of equal importance in each of their lives. Until they reach that point where they believe that they have to complete this level of their education and are willing to do whatever it takes and put in whatever time is required, nothing we do can provide that motivation for them. Possibly the best reason to run these orientation classes, then, is to help students become more self-aware and better able to make educational choices for themselves. When they do fully commit to attending school, then we can provide tremendous assistance and encouragement. As with the salesmen and saleswomen in the shoe store, we need to help students find the shoe with the right fit. If the shoe fits, hopefully they will wear it.