



Retention Specialist Connie Pierett (left) and GED Chief Examiner Sharon Harvey (right) have been key players in New River Community College's efforts to increase retention.

Retention

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Pay Off

New River Finds Success with Retention

by JENNY BOLTE

For the past six summers, key staff members in our program have participated in a continuous quality improvement retreat to analyze our strengths and areas of improvement. It's a hard week because we take an honest and objective look at our program, and we must check our egos at the door. Summer 2005's retreat was much like past retreats. There we were, sitting around the board room table, weary from staring at Post-it® flip chart pages that were themselves beginning to droop and lose their sticky from being moved around the walls. As I dropped the handout packets of NRS Tables 4 and 5 onto the stack in front of me, I stated, "I can't believe that with all of the changes and all of the new initiatives, our data is pretty much the same as it's always been." I was frustrated. I knew that we had come a long way, but at the end of the day, it's truly the data that matters most.

One of the teachers responded, "But you don't know what our data would be like had we not implemented these changes this year."

"Yeah," I answered, "that's true, but it's just not enough." We called it a day; we would wait until the next morning to begin setting goals and strategizing for the upcoming year.

As I went back into the office, our GED® Chief Examiner Sharon Harvey was working at her desk trying to complete the paperwork from her recent testing. "How did everyone do?" I asked.

"Well, we had some not make it. I'm going to call them as soon as I can because some of them really need to go back into classes."

This was a usual exchange between us. I went into my office and sat down. Our program outcomes had angered me. As far as the DOE could see, we were status quo. They would never know some of the exciting changes we had implemented. They would never know how far we had come. I was frustrated by the money

spent on marketing. All those newspaper ads and billboards. All those blasted flyers. No return.

Then it hit me, and I walked back to Sharon's office. "How many people do you think have not passed the GED over the past 18 or so months?" I asked her.

"Well, at least two hundred," she answered.

"Oh my," I responded, "let me ask you this. Suppose we were to hire someone to manage those folks. To create a file for each of them and not release them until they have passed the GED." Sharon looked at me, and I could tell the wheels were turning in her head. She's the reality-checker to my pie-in-the-sky dreams. The money. How could we pay for such a person? Who would do such a job? What exactly would we be asking this person to do? "Let's think about this," I told her, "and we can get back to it tomorrow."

The next day, Sharon and I talked some more about the idea. "I think you're

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on to something,” she said as she handed me a printout of names. “There are 223 people on this list,” Sharon said, shaking her head in disgust.

“I guess it’s like a death, isn’t it?” I asked Sharon. We had noticed when talking with our students who didn’t pass the GED that, at first, they were shocked and sad—then came denial and anger. Then they would give up, and we would never see them again. Sharon and I both agreed that we just didn’t have the time to talk to the students like we should. They needed support when going through the

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gamut of emotions, and we simply didn’t have enough time to do this for them.

“Connie,” Sharon said. “If anyone can do this, Connie Pierett could.” I agreed with her. Connie was our Distance Education Instructor, and we have joked that she’s a cross between a hummingbird and a junkyard dog. Connie had transformed our dying distance education program into the strongest program in our region. Sharon and I agreed that Connie, with her tireless energy and dogged determination, was the right person for this job. We also agreed that we would greatly limit the money we spent on marketing and put the savings into this new position. After all, we deduced, it made more sense to recruit

from a known audience than to put up billboards and Sunday advertisements in the local papers to market to the unknown.

So, we decided to call this position a Retention Specialist, and we took a leap of faith that it would pay off. That afternoon I approached Connie about taking on this responsibility. I didn’t have all of the details worked out, and I certainly didn’t have a formal job description to give her, but Connie immediately accepted the offer. “What I’m asking you to do is manage the GED non-completers by creating an Excel spreadsheet with their demographic information and test scores. I’d like for you to contact all the students at least once monthly as well as send them something in the mail to help keep them connected to the program. Do whatever you can to get them to pass the GED. Bug them short of harassment. Also, I’d like for each student to have a file where you and the student devise a study plan to work toward passing the GED. You’ll have to keep the file current until each passes. Essentially, your job is to work yourself out of a job,” I told Connie. She enthusiastically accepted this mission. Since office space is at a premium, Sharon and I agreed that a cell phone would allow Connie the flexibility to work whenever and wherever she needed to get the job done. It wasn’t until much later that Connie came to me and excitedly reported the numbers who had passed the GED. But, she added, with each testing she would win some and lose some. Her numbers were staying about the same. “How’s that for job security?” I responded.

At the close of the year during our summer 2006 retreat, we were once again analyzing our data. Because of her new position, Connie had joined the Leadership Team. “Oh my,” we said as the data jumped off the page, “an increase. We

have a 47% increase in GED completions!” We were all pretty ecstatic.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell exactly what causes dips and blips, but I felt pretty certain that the root lay with the work Connie was doing. “It’s bigger than just the Retention Specialist,” we concluded. As we examined our program, we realized that other elements had to work congruently with Connie to bring about the increase; Connie couldn’t do it alone.

As Connie counseled students, she had to offer them some way to work toward completing their GED. GED class

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offerings had to change dramatically. After all, doing the same thing the same way and expecting a different result was ludicrous. If what we were doing was not meeting student needs, then we had to do things differently. We had to offer classes with more intensity and duration, as well as give students the option of instruction during alternative times conducive to their work and family lives. We had to make a concerted effort to not only talk to our students about their needs but also truly hear what they were saying to us, and then do something about it. Some students needed individual or small group instruction after classes to be able to progress at a quicker pace. Other students wanted the opportunity

to work in an open computer lab with our GED software. Students wanted to be more in control of their education, so our program created lesson plans using the Virginia GED Content Standards that were geared to the student and written in a way we believed would help students know what they needed to know and be able to do to be confident going into the GED Tests.

We then realized that it was also more than the Retention Specialist and instruction: Sharon was a critical element to the success equation. When students were ready to re-test, Connie and Sharon worked together to offer the GED Tests at a time convenient to the student. Sharon's Test-on-Demand schedule took

off, and her regular schedule doubled as she traveled throughout the region taking the test out to the different localities. Students were also allowed to take one or two tests at a time if that made them more comfortable. Sharon's workload intensified greatly, but she stated, "It's worth it if our students are passing."

Sometimes it's really hard to make changes even though you know they're the right thing to do. Our program believes that change is necessary to our growth and student success. We've tried a lot of things, and often we've had to use that old football cliché, "Let's drop back and punt." As we work and encounter problems, we try to remember to invest our energy in finding the solutions and

not in focusing so much on the problems themselves. I don't have enough data to prove that our 47% increase in GED completions was because of the dramatic changes we enacted, but in my heart I believe that the Retention Specialist, alternative options for instruction, student feedback, and a varied and flexible GED testing schedule contributed to the increase our program finally saw. It was a leap of faith, and I believe it is paying off. ■

Jenny Bolte is adult education program manager at New River Community College.

New Start Just-in-Time Tutor Training (continued from page 3)

ting with a different student for a couple of weeks prior to being matched. The result is that the master teacher spends little time supervising the new tutor once he has begun working with the student with whom he has been matched. This does not give adequate time for the tutor to identify and develop the specific skills and techniques that will work most effectively with the student. With the *New*

Start approach, the student and tutor match takes place almost immediately, the classes are homogeneous by reading level, and the just-in-time learning for new tutors is continuous. Tutors benefit from the longer and more focused counsel from master teachers, and students benefit from more targeted and more expert tutoring.

With *New Start*, we believe we have

developed a better way to support our adult learners and dedicated volunteer tutors. We look forward to comparing the results from the two groups and seeing if our expectations will be met. ■

Carol Holmquist is the Executive Director of The READ Center in Richmond, VA.

Comprehensive Counseling Services for Adult Learners (continued from page 7)

by trained peers or professionals, cooperative study groups, student learning communities, classrooms that promote collaborative and cooperative learning, and workshops and presentations on topics that support better learning. Support groups, although time-consuming for the already overburdened adult learner, can address the aforementioned isolation often associated with the academic experience. The group support can range from clarification of information about academic demands and resources to emotional support for the anxiety associated with the stressful endeavor to social support from study buddies and study groups. Co-leadership by a peer who has successfully negotiated the learning

environment and who has developed skills and mastery of the academic setting can be extremely helpful and provides modeling for adult learners who are struggling with the transition. These peer models and others can also serve as valuable mentors.

Mentorship programs, as an adjunct to counseling and related services, have the potential to extend the benefits of counseling by reinforcing and monitoring the newly learned skills, extending the practice of reflection and self-assessment, and building on strengths. The benefit of all of these processes is the reduction of isolation and the increase of motivation necessary to persevere as an adult learner in the face of often over-

whelming obstacles.

Comprehensive services for adult learners consist of meaningful interaction with teachers, counselors, advisors, and peers who are trained and knowledgeable about the unique needs of adults and the resources and support services available to them. Advising, counseling and mentoring for adult learners by a dedicated team can mean the difference between successful goal attainment and frustration and failed dreams. ■

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