

Role of GED Counselors in Student Retention

by ELAINE CALLAHAN

Assessing students to determine their ABE/GED needs is a crucial part of the Adult Education process, but after the assessment what happens? Enter the ABE/GED counselor. The Henrico County Adult Education Center has used this position for quite a few years. Over the years, the duties have evolved to create one of the most important positions we have in our program. Our counselors have four main goals: assessment/class placement, student motivation, student retention, and student success.

The major role of our counselors is to focus on student success and to develop a program that fits each student's individual needs. After the assessment has been completed, our counselor meets one on one with the student and discusses what the results mean, what the specific goals of the student are, and how the student will achieve those goals. A brochure, developed by one of our counselors, entitled "GED TEST – Are You Ready?" is completed and given to each student during the counseling session. This brochure helps the students track their progress and gives them a better understanding of the process and what it takes to earn a GED certificate. After placement in the appropriate class, the counselor then focuses on student orientation and retention.

Since the counselor is the first point of contact for our students, they have formed an initial bond and will often turn to their counselor for guidance and motivation, along with the classroom teacher. Since we follow a managed enrollment model, our students must attend an orientation conducted by the counselor. The session reviews the expectations of the adult education program, explaining attendance policies, our incentive program, our tutoring program, and other policies the students may need to know. This allows for continuity, and it ensures that all information disseminated is the same, whether a student attends during the day or during the evening.

Our counselors also make personal contact with our students. If a student has been missing class, a counselor will

call and/or send a postcard letting them know they need to return, and reminding them of the importance of returning to class. Many adult education students did not have a positive school experience. They enjoy having that counselor, a person who listens, gives a gentle nudge, and offers the encouragement needed to succeed.

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Could the classroom teachers perform these duties? Yes, they could— although perhaps not at the same intensity or with the same duration as a person whose position is devoted only to counseling students on an individual basis. In our case, all of our classroom teachers are part time employees, and many are not available, either in person or via telephone. The instructional priorities of the classroom are significant, and the instructor's focus is different from that of the counselor.

Our data indicates that our student retention has improved each year. We have gone from 225 students separating before completion in 2005/06 to 111 students separating before completion in 2006/07. This is a 49.3 percent increase in student retention. When we did an informal survey of our students, we found that the counselor played a major role in their experience with our program. Three

major factors came to our attention:

1 Students cited as a reason for staying in the program that a full time counselor was available to discuss their individual needs outside of the classroom. One student responded with, "That's why I like this place. People care." Another student responded, after receiving a postcard from our counselor asking her to return to the program, that it was the only card she had received over the holidays, and it meant so much to her. Again, it was the personal touch of someone available full time showing that the program cares about each individual.

2 Students stated that they liked being in a class where the other students were at the same level. The counselors are responsible for organizing the different levels of classes offered.

3 Student incentives are available. Counselors are responsible for developing, coordinating, and disseminating teacher and student incentives. The thought and care they have put into choosing the items to be used as incentives focuses on the needs, achievements, and goals of the students, teachers, and entire program.

Overall, the role of the counselor at the Henrico County Adult Education Center has had a positive impact on the entire program, allowing for a positive experience for our students. ■

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