

Doing Something About Attrition: A Project to Enhance Student Retention in Adult Basic Education

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A multi-phase effort to improve the retention rate was undertaken in the ABE Program at Southeast Community College in Lincoln, NE. In Phase One, student enrollment over a two year period was analyzed for patterns of post-enrollment participation, In Phase Two, data from Phase One were provided in synopsis form to a task force who reviewed the data and developed three components to be combined in various ways to form three experimental strategies designed to reduce attrition at the sites implemented. In Phase Three, data on the effects of these strategies were collected and analyzed

The results demonstrated that students' participation in ABE after enrollment can take a number of different paths. Many differences among students are masked when students are classified only as completing, continuing, or noncontinuing. Differences were discovered when examined in terms of students who completed a GED as opposed to those who completed other goals. GED completers tended to be a younger group, and other completing students tended to be in the oldest group. Short-term noncontinuing students are different from either long-term continuing students or stopouts across several variables. Often, short-term noncontinuing students look much more like GED completers than other noncontinuing students. Hence, we know that studies evaluating ABE programs should take into consideration the broad spectrum of outcomes of enrollment rather than the more limited but more commonly used outcomes.

Retention Strategies

Phase One

Enrollment over a two-year period was analyzed for patterns of post-enrollment participation.

Phase Two

Three specific strategies were designed to reduce student attrition: orientation, assessment and feedback, and goal-setting.

Phase Three

Data on the effects of these strategies were collected and analyzed.

Effect of Retention Strategies

Making the first few hours in the program as meaningful as possible was supported by the data.

Attrition was lower in the Phase Three student samples (52%) compared to the two-year baseline data of Phase One (67%). The activities that seemed to be most effective were associated with all three strategies.

The results seem to suggest that when teachers spend more time with students and carefully think through the nature of their interactions with them in each of the three areas, some of the students

who otherwise may not continue are being influenced to stay with the program. Attention to the quality of basic instructional issues seems to make a difference.

Although more analysis is required, these results indicate that certain students may be more at risk for not continuing than other students. Identifying students at risk may provide teachers and staff with additional information that can be used in assisting these students to reach their goals. The authors believe that the "Risk Factor Form" which was used in their program is a way of differentiating students who complete from those who do not.

Recommendations

1. Develop awareness among all program staff of characteristics that suggest students may be at risk in completing their goals.
2. Review the nature of the teaching-learning environment for longer term students -- those who stay in the program longer than 12 hours. Given some commitment to their goals, then, why do they choose to leave before completing their goals? Do they require more structure in their instructional plans or need more frequent feedback on their progress. Do they have preferred learning styles that are not being addressed, or do they have more or different needs for educational and other forms of counseling?
3. Develop rigorous studies of "stopout" behavior. For example, what proportion actually do complete their goals? Are there important differences between those who complete their goals and those who do not? What factors contribute to this pattern of behavior? What can programs do to reduce the incidence of this enrollment pattern?
4. Study the decision-making and valuing process that students use in withdrawing. Students' decisions to enroll represents an investment of time and energy. What leads them to decide to withdraw? What aspects of their lives compete with the value they place on competing their goals? How do they balance the perceived short-term value of withdrawing from its more long-term consequences? Do they think about their decisions in this way? Are there ways in which programs can help students with this decision-making and valuing process?
5. Evaluate effectiveness of various strategies to reduce rate of noncontinuation. Advancement of our knowledge requires the attention of many skilled researchers working in this area. More adequate funding of research in ABE would attract researchers to address this issue.

Conclusions

Because the results reported are based on the study of a single program, generalizations to other programs in the state are not possible, as ABE programs in Nebraska vary widely in many different ways. It is recognized that ABE programs differ significantly; however, this study represents some possible ways in which the complex problem of noncontinuation can be approached. Each program will need to determine the extent to which these issues are problematic within their program.

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