

# **Orientations for New Students: Building a Foundation for Learning**

## **Establishing an Orientation for New Students**

Adult learners decide every day whether to continue with a program or course of study. Both students and programs suffer when students leave before they reach their goals. Current research on student persistence shows that programs can have a positive impact on how long a student stays in the program and how much progress that student makes. Quigley (1998) notes “the common characteristics within our learner population, the one that distinguishes it from other populations in the educational spectrum, is that most of our students dropped out of school. Furthermore, most did so under unhappy circumstances.” One way programs can improve persistence and overcome negative views of education is to provide students with comprehensive orientations. Orientations can help programs set the stage for students to be more successful, reduce their anxiety, and foster positive relationships among students, staff, instructors, and the program.

### **What is Persistence?**

Persistence is defined as *the combination of intensity and duration; the hours of instruction per week and the length of time a student is engaged in learning.*

All programs strive to have students stay in the program and meet their literacy goals in a reasonable period of time. Programs do not want to lose students too quickly nor hang onto them for too long.

Programs can positively affect persistence by providing orientations that will help new students be more prepared to learn. Orientations can also help students decide if they are ready to participate or if they need to address other issues first.

### **Active Learning and Student Orientations**

Programs can use active learning techniques during student orientations. Active learning helps students draw on existing skills to learn something new. Programs can foster active learning by having students work together in small groups or in pairs. This also helps students build relationships with each other, thus reducing isolation. Students are less likely to leave a program when they have developed a relationship with staff, volunteers, and other students.

### **Research on Learner Persistence**

Researchers have begun to focus more attention on learner persistence in recent years. Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) interviewed 150 pre-GED students in New England and conducted follow-up interviews four months later. Comings, Cuban, Bos, and Porter (2003) studied adult learner persistence in library literacy programs. Porter, Cuban, and Comings (2005) concluded that most students are not persisting sufficiently “to make meaningful gains on standardized tests” (Porter et al., 2005, p. 25).

Belzer (1998) found that students who leave a program do not view it as dropping out and most planned to return in the future.

The above studies and others have shown that students often leave programs with the goal of returning at a later date. The studies also have found that students will work on literacy activities independently. Programs that incorporate persistence studies findings can use orientations to help students see they can return to a program if they need to stop out and to find ways of continuing to work until they can return to their classes.

## Five Pathways to Program Participation

Porter, Cuban, and Comings (2005) describe five pathways to student participation based on the experiences of students at the nine library literacy programs that participated in the Literacy in Libraries across America (LILAA) persistence study:

**Short-Term Pathway** — Students on the short-term pathway have a specific goal and usually participate until they reach that goal. Most of these students have few persistence barriers or manage to overcome their barriers long enough to meet their learning goal or to transfer to another program. These students may need less support but during orientation, should be made aware of other programs that can help them achieve their long-term goals.

**Long-Term Pathway** — These students will participate regularly over an extended period of time. Most have overcome barriers successfully or have learned to bypass them through personal and community supports. Students on the long-term pathway tend to be over 30 and are more likely to accept service delays or slow progress. They also may require less support, but programs should establish a positive, supportive relationship with them.

**Mandatory Pathway** — Students on the mandatory pathway are required to participate because a law enforcement or public assistance agency requires them to do so. These students may leave as soon as the restriction on leaving is lifted, or sometimes, before. Student orientations can help students on the mandatory pathway set personal goals that will help them take ownership of their learning and participate regardless of being required to do so.

**Tryout Pathway** — Some students face barriers to persistence that can't be overcome, or they may lack goals needed to motivate them to continue. Student orientations help these students set realistic and attainable goals and help them decide whether they are ready to begin in the program or if they need more time to overcome barriers.

**Intermittent Pathway** — Students on the intermittent pathway participate for a longer period of time and tend to move in and out of the program over months or years. The LILAA persistence study found that some students would take part in other literacy services or stay in contact with the program even when not active in the program. These students did not see themselves as dropouts. Many adult learners, especially those who work or have families, will be on this pathway. During orientation, programs can stress that students are welcomed back if they need to take time off.

Porter, Cuban, and Comings note that students may follow different pathways at different times. They use the example of a student on the short-term pathway who moves to the intermittent pathway after taking a new job or because a family member has become ill.

Regardless of which pathway a student takes, programs should strive to provide services to all. This could include helping them find a different program that would better serve their needs. Programs can provide services for all types of students by providing an orientation.

## **How Student Orientations Can Help Programs Increase Persistence**

Intake and orientation should help students understand the program, set realistic expectations, build a working relationship with program staff, and establish learning goals (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999) – all of which impacts retention.

Some programs have difficulty meeting certain benchmarks, such as learning gains, hours of participation, retention, and goal attainment. Orientations can help students decide if they are able to participate or set more realistic, attainable goals. Programs also can inform students about more available educational opportunities if they are unable to enroll in the program or attend class on a regular basis.

Orientation can help students identify their pathway and understand the impact it will have on their progress. Students on the try-out pathway may want to wait and re-enter the program when they are able to devote more time to learning. This saves programs time and money and lessens students' frustration, increasing their chances of a successful return.

Orientations also help students identify barriers to their persistence such as work, childcare, transportation, or health. Even though the barriers may be insurmountable, programs can work with students to devise ways they can work around or with their barriers to be more successful. Programs may be able to refer some students to social service agencies that can provide a resolution for a barrier.

Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) identified four main supports for students:

1. Managing the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence. Programs can use student orientations to identify the forces acting on an individual student, so the student can determine which ones can be managed, making the positive forces stronger and the negative forces weaker.
2. Self-efficacy — Programs can use orientations to build self-efficacy in students. Self-efficacy differs from self-confidence in that it focuses on a specific goal or task and the feeling that one can accomplish that task or goal.
3. Setting a Goal — one of the most important steps a student can take is setting a goal. During student orientations, programs can help students define their goals and understand what they must do to meet them. Programs also should help students understand that goals need to be revisited periodically as they may change over time.
4. The fourth support programs can provide is progress toward reaching a goal. Although programs can't provide this type of support during orientation, they can set the stage for how they will measure progress toward meeting a specific goal.

## Setting up Student Orientations

Programs can consider these options when designing orientations:

- Orientation location — programs may want to hold orientations on-site at the same time their classes or tutoring will take place, thus attracting students who will be able to participate. Programs also may wish to conduct some orientations off-site in order to reach new student populations.
- Programs need to determine how frequently to conduct orientations, the best days and times to hold orientations, and how long the orientation should last. Programs may want to conduct orientations on the same days and times as classes. Some programs have orientations that last at least 12 hours after which a student is enrolled as a full-time student. Programs that offer night and/or weekend classes should have orientations at those times as well.
- Programs should determine whether to make orientations mandatory and whether English-as-a-second-language (ESL) student orientations should be conducted separately.
- Programs need to consider how to recruit students for orientations and whether orientations will be used to increase the number of students currently served or to target new populations.
- Programs should consider the resources available for orientations, including financial, staff, volunteers, space, and materials. Some programs have closed enrollment and the instructors provide orientations during a break.

## Designing Content for Student Orientations

Orientations should be relevant and meaningful for students; they may need to address local needs or concerns. Whenever possible, programs should include successful students in planning and delivering orientations. When designing content, programs need to take into consideration:

- Program overview and what students should expect, including:
  - Becoming a student, including assessment, and placement
  - Instruction offered, including where and when
  - Curricula introduction
  - Supplemental or alternative instruction offered
  - Agency policies and procedures
- Goal Setting —Persistence studies have found that students who are able to articulate a clear goal are more likely to persist
  - Set expectations to periodically reevaluate and reset goals, to account for unrealistic expectations or a goal change
- Identifying student's learning style(s) and strategies to acquire new skills

## Resources - click on the following links to view these documents

1. Sample budget for student orientation
2. Action Plan for creating student orientations
3. Creating Student Orientations – a case study with guidelines for ABE and ESL students
4. Kihslinger, J. (2007). Effective orientation *doubles* retention rate in Wisconsin. KET Adult Learning Quarterly, 22 (2).

## Additional Resources

The following courses are available on the ProLiteracy Professional Development at:

[http://www.newreaderspress.com/default\\_prolit.aspx](http://www.newreaderspress.com/default_prolit.aspx)

1. PLASP 10 – Adult Student Persistence
2. PLASP 30 – Should I Stay or Should I Go Now?

“Effective orientation *doubles* retention rate in Wisconsin.” *Adult Learning Quarterly*, March 2007 vol. 22 No. 2 (see PDF file).

Belzer, A. 1998. “Stopping Out Not Dropping Out.” *Focus on Basics* 2 (8): 15-17.

Comings, J., S. Cuban, J. Bos, and K. Porter with F. Doolittle. 2003. “*As Long As It Takes*”: *Responding to the Challenges of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs*. New York: MDRC.

Comings, J., A. Parrella, and L. Soricone. 1999. *Persistence Among Adult Basic Education Students in Pre-GED Classes*. NCSALL Reports 12. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

Porter, K.E., S. Cuban, S., and J. Comings. “*One Day I Will Make It*”: *A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs*.

Quigley, B. A. 1998. “The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation,” *Focus on Basics* 2 (8): 6-11.