

First Mondays

Monthly Notes for Virginia's Adult Education Providers



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DIVISION OF
**TECHNOLOGY, CAREER &
ADULT EDUCATION**
OFFICE OF ADULT EDUCATION & LITERACY SERVICES

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CALENDAR



EL/Civics Symposium
February 20-21
Richmond

**Virginia Literacy Leadership
Council (VLLC) Conference**
February 27-28, 2014
Richmond

**New Regional Program
Managers Meeting**
March 12
Staunton

**Regional Program Managers
and EL/Civics Program
Managers Meeting**
March 13
Staunton

Program-tested Recruitment and Retention Strategies by Hillary Major, VALRC specialist*

The Office of Adult Education and Literacy's strategic plan includes the bold recruiting and retention goal of reporting a minimum of 40,000 students into the National Reporting System and retaining a minimum of 32,000 students (80%) annually by 2017. As a comparison, in Program Year 2012-2013, Virginia reported 24,163 enrolled students to NRS and retained 17,015 (70%). Yet meeting basic requirements to serve 3% of the local adult population without a high school credential and to show continuous improvement in recruitment and retention numbers remain a yearly struggle for many programs.

OAEL and the Resource Center have formed joint teams to learn more about what's working around the state, what supports are needed, and how we can best prepare to meet the strategic plan's stretch goals. Members of the Goal 2 team recently talked to several administrators in regions with a track record of meeting or exceeding recruitment and retention goals: Dale Temple and Kathy Anderson of Crater Regional (SPACE), Susan Erno of Thomas Jefferson Regional, Paul Palumbo of Virginia Beach, and Amy Shockley from the Eastern Shore. These individuals told a consistent story of working to create a program culture that values learners and their goals, supports teachers and staff, and monitors results. These efforts lie behind the success of the single most important recruitment method – "word of mouth" from learners' own families and friends.

"Word of mouth" may seem like the easiest kind of free advertising, but a great deal of planning goes into creating a learning experience that will keep busy adults coming back for more and motivate them to tell their friends and loved ones about it. Virginia Beach has a counselor on-site during both day and evening classes to provide any type of counselling an adult student may need. Virginia Beach also offers special classes in areas of high student interest: weekly math study groups, reading and writing study groups, and Saturday classes to provide extra help. The program brings in monthly motivational speakers or guest speakers from the local community college. Transition fairs held twice a year connect students with employers, colleges, and community colleges.

For Susan Erno in Charlottesville, "creating a community of learners" isn't a trendy

GED®



Resources for GED® 2014
information

[Virginia's GED® Web site](#)

[VALRC](#)

[Online Forum for Virginia's 2014
GED® Instructors](#)

[GEDTS](#)

[OAEL](#)

Money Matters



In January's *Money Matters*, the deadline to submit budget amendments to purchase technology was listed as February 14 rather than February 3. To avoid any confusion, the deadline for technology budget amendments has been moved to February 14, 2014.

Final reimbursement requests for approved technology purchases are due by April 17, 2014.

catchphrase, it's a practical approach to program design. A large part of this effort is building up her teachers so that they can work successfully with their students, but valuing the student experience is also important. For students who make a consistent effort to attend classes and prioritize their educations but who still struggle to make the gains necessary to pass the GED® test, Thomas Jefferson offers the Regional Scholars' Program, which recognizes adult learners for their work ethic, class attendance, and passion for succeeding.

Even rural programs with fewer resources and less formal class structures can invest in making the learner experience personal and positive. The Eastern Shore program encourages a buddy system to help learners support each other. All of the administrators interviewed mentioned the importance of contacting learners with absences. On the Eastern Shore, teachers are responsible for telephoning and mailing reminders to students after two missed classes (with the regional data specialist checking in and giving reminders if needed). In Charlottesville, a dedicated Outreach Specialist (hired with Race to GED funds) makes follow-up calls.

As a retention strategy, incentives work: Thomas Jefferson offers \$25 vouchers toward their next class to students with 90% attendance (those who miss three or fewer classes). In addition, the region awards perfect attendance certificates and posts recipients' names on the wall of the school office. In Virginia Beach, learners can earn a voucher for a free GED® test when they pass the pre-test. Virginia Beach also gives monthly perfect attendance certificates, celebrated at regular awards breakfasts.

For programs that excel at recruitment, investing in excellent word of mouth is just one piece of the puzzle. At SPACE, Dale Temple and Kathy Anderson share the top means by which students hear about their program: word of mouth followed by Internet search, service agency referrals, and churches. (Keeping track of the data on how students find the program was also a common thread among those interviewed.) Keeping a user-friendly and up-to-date web presence is key, but making personal connections in the community is just as important when promoting adult education programs. Dale Temple puts a high priority on networking with partners, whether service agencies or workforce centers, and regularly attends (and hands out flyers) at community events. A local church advertises SPACE classes on its outside bulletin board. Amy Shockley also mentioned the importance of enlisting local churches to help with recruitment efforts, along with attending events at the local elementary school, placing local radio and public bus ads, and posting to the Eastern Shore Community College Facebook account. Virginia Beach and the Thomas Jefferson Region publish catalogs with class schedules and testing information, which they distribute to local libraries, service agencies, workforce centers, and rehab and recreational centers. For Susan Erno, making community connections includes accepting assistance from the school system's public relations staff person,



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working to place programming on the local public access TV channel (which is currently airing 30-minute informational spots on the new GED® test every Saturday), and giving interviews with local news stations

The strategies that will bring in and retain the greatest number of adult learners will vary from region to region, though the wisdom of experienced managers offers some promising starting points:

- Creatively promoting a positive learner experience
- Offering meaningful incentives
- Making and maintaining connections in the community
- Developing a diverse portfolio of outreach efforts

While none of these are “quick fixes” for programs that struggle with recruitment and retention, the good news is that the two elements reinforce each other. A program that motivates learners to attend regularly and meet goals successfully is also one that will reap the benefits of passionate, positive word of mouth.

Note: Recruitment and retention are challenges to adult education programs (and other educational institutions) nationwide. For further reading on learner persistence, resources include:

- [California Adult Education Research Digest No. 2: Learner Persistence in Adult Basic Education by Sandra Kerka](#)
- [Ohio Literacy ResourceCenter: Research to Practice: Increasing Retention through Student Success by Kari Malitz and Sarah Nixon-Ponder](#)
- [NCSALL Review of Adult Learning and Literacy: Persistence: Helping Adult Education Students Reach Their Goals by John P. Comings](#)

*This article has been compiled from summaries of several phone interviews and discussions with the OAEL and VALRC interviewers; any accidental misrepresentations are the author’s alone.

Did you know that the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center’s [Communities Portal Page](#) helps you stay up to date with important events and advances in the field of adult education? You will be able to take advantage of free, high quality resources and connect with colleagues all over the state and across the country.

