

NCTN Promising Practice Series: *Recruitment - Leveraging Community Partnerships to Increase College Transition Student Enrollment*

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field that are designed to promote the successful transition of students from ABE/ESOL to postsecondary education.

Contributed by

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PROGRAM CONTEXT

X-Cel, Inc. Adult Education, founded in 2000, makes high school completion and college preparation more accessible to more than 350 low-income adults each year by providing flexible, customized instruction at four convenient community locations in the Greater Boston area at no cost to students. X-Cel Adult Education provides pre-GED, GED, and college prep classes to more than 200 adult students at any one time.

Rather than offering our classes at one centralized location, X-Cel partners with neighborhood-based, non-profit organizations to provide convenient, no-cost classes to their clients or residents. Community partner agencies provide classroom space at no charge to X-Cel and collaborate with X-Cel to secure the funding needed to operate the classes. X-Cel also recruits and trains volunteer instructors and tutors to supplement paid staff.

RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND OF THE PRACTICE

This promising practice focuses on a new student recruitment strategy based on our experiences in expanding our relationship with a community partner -- STRIVE, a job-training and readiness program. Since X-Cel's college transition program requires students to have a GED or high school diploma, our original transition recruitment efforts consisted of contacting adult education providers/GED programs in the greater Boston area. We met with them and visited their GED classes, promoting the college transition program, but we did not get any referrals to our program. We had significant difficulty in recruiting a large enough pool of students because students either chose to go to work after completing their GED or didn't really think a transition program was necessary.

We were also recruiting from X-Cel's own GED programs, but this wasn't producing enough recruits for the college transition program. Because we did not begin each college transition cycle with adequate numbers of students (we were hoping to start with 15 students), when issues came up and students left the program, our completion and transition outcomes were

below our targets. Following several unsuccessful rounds of recruitment efforts using this method we realized we needed a different strategy.

After attending the *Effective Transitions in Adult Education Conference* organized by the National College Transition Network (NCTN), we were able to draw on the experience of other college transition programs. We learned that other college transition programs had similar difficulties recruiting students from adult education providers. At the conference, programs shared their experiences and strategies for recruiting students. The programs that were recruiting from a range of venues, not just from adult education and GED programs, were more successful in building a large pool of potential candidates. It seemed that successful programs recruited four students for every single student completing the program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

After returning from the conference, we re-evaluated our recruitment process and realized that we were not effectively leveraging the multiple collaborations that already existed between X-Cel and our community-based partners -- ranging from a housing authority to a correctional facility. It made perfect sense to build recruitment for the college transition program directly into the educational services we were already providing through these ongoing partnerships. In the end, we based our recruitment efforts on three interlocking strategies:

- Integrating recruitment into current services for partners
- In-person recruitment based on an ongoing relationship with students
- Encouraging students to think about postsecondary education as early and often as possible

Integrating recruitment into current services for partners

We started working more closely with STRIVE, one of our larger partners. STRIVE runs an intensive, five-week job readiness program that prepares people for entry-level jobs. X-Cel was already providing reading and math classes twice a week as part of STRIVE's program. We were able to reach even more potential college transition students by providing additional services to STRIVE participants. We agreed to do the educational assessments for all of their sites and this gave us access to a larger pool of students who already had their GEDs or high school diplomas. Approximately 50% of STRIVE participants do not have a high school diploma or GED, so X-Cel focuses on beginning to prepare these participants for their GED exam. Students who complete their program at STRIVE can continue working on their GED at X-Cel's other locations.

However about 50% of STRIVE participants do have their high school diploma or GED but most have not been in a classroom for a long time. So, we changed how we worked with these students. On our first day, when we administered the educational assessments to all STRIVE participants, we began pulling out everyone who already had a GED or high school diploma. We told them about X-Cel's college transition program and that as a STRIVE participant they were eligible to join. We explained the requirements and benefits of joining the college transition program, along with how important it was for them to consider going to college to improve their future career options. Anyone who expressed interest were allowed to begin working on their college transition math work during their educational sessions at STRIVE. During this period the potential college transition students began to complete some of their college transition math work and build a relationship with X-Cel staff at the same time. As a

result of this relationship, anywhere from 40 – 60% of our recruits each cycle now come from STRIVE.

STRIVE is a good partner because they also identify education as the key to leveling the playing field for their clients, most of whom face multiple economic barriers. In addition, we report to STRIVE the number of individuals who sign up for the GED tests, pass the GED, attend our college transition program, complete the program and register for postsecondary education. STRIVE, in turn, can report this to their funders.

In-person recruitment based on an ongoing relationship with students

Another key factor that has improved our recruitment numbers from STRIVE, and from all of the programs we work with, is that all prospective students are hearing about the college transition program from someone they know, trust, and with whom they have an ongoing relationship. Though our staff had previously visited GED classes to speak to groups of students, we had no pre-existing relationship with the students. Also, the instructors were usually unfamiliar with the college transition program. The relationship building process is very important and really improves the chances that a student will consider entering the college transition program. In fact, rather than make presentations to groups of GED students who don't know our staff, we now make presentations to adult education staff from other programs, and we encourage them to visit our college transition program, and then we ask them to tell their students about our program and to invite them to join our program after passing their GED exam. This change in recruitment has produced much improved results.

Encouraging students to think about postsecondary education as early and often as possible

Some of our recruitment for the college transition program is subtle but consistent. For example, in X-Cel's own GED programs, as well as those we provide for partner agencies, we start talking with each student about what they want to do in the future, long before they take their GED exam. We raise the question, why are you getting a GED? What do you think a GED will do for you? We push the message that the GED is where the door opens; it is the starting point and the key to a better life. We gently present the fact that a GED will not necessarily result in a better job or in a lot more money; however, pursuing postsecondary education will provide these results. We are constantly working with the students on goal setting. These goals include further education.

We also start working with GED students to address the issues that may prevent them from being successful in college. Students become aware of the commitment they have to make to be successful in a college setting and that helps the students make an educated decision as to whether they are ready to enter the college transition program. We talk about the ways that the college transition program can support them by offering information and help in accessing financial aid, providing assistance with the college application process, and offering mentoring once they are in college. This message is constantly reinforced over the time the student is in any of our GED programs.

Find the right partner

We maximized our relationship with STRIVE because this organization could provide X-Cel access to a large group of adults that already had their high school diploma or GED but had been out of school for a considerable time. A job-training program that works with low-skilled, low-income adults was a natural fit. College transition programs should investigate developing relationships with organizations that share a similar mission, clientele, stakeholders, and

values—programs that can collaborate and be mutually supportive to the clients they share. For instance, STRIVE works with their local community college to give college credit for computer courses, which demonstrates their commitment to education for their clients.

Other potential partners are other ABE programs in your area. The ABE provider needs to really understand and believe in the value of the college transition process and communicate that to their students. It may be a learning curve for some ABE instructors and counselors. They may be sending their college-bound students directly to college, not understanding the advantages of a comprehensive college transition program even for academically ready students. Many ABE providers do not understand how hard it is for their students to navigate the college culture. Attending the program staff meeting to talk about the benefits of the college transition program for their students and inviting an ABE/GED instructor/counselor or program director to attend a college transition program orientation is a good way to start the process. Having their students visit a transition class is helpful, too.

Staff requirements for this strategy

A key skill for a staff member is the ability to build collaborations; to sell your program to other providers; to get them interested in seeing what your program does; and to demonstrate why working together will be mutually beneficial. The recruiter’s job is to motivate the agency partner to recruit or refer students for your program. You need to be ready to spend time building the relationship, even proving to the organization that you have an equal stake in the success of their clients. If you are working with an agency that is providing you with referrals it is important to report back to them on the progress of their referrals. Everyone likes to hear about success.

Challenges

We were in a unique situation with our relationship with STRIVE, but it still took us quite a while to prove to STRIVE that we are as invested in their students as they are. They needed to see concrete evidence of student participation and educational growth before they increased our role in their program. In the very beginning, STRIVE had us doing evening classes in one location outside their training program time. Now we handle all of their initial educational assessment and our classes are part of their direct program time. You have to start small, and maybe provide free services.

Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness

We definitely increased our pool of eligible students through our relationship with STRIVE. Our enrollment goal is to recruit 15 qualified students each cycle for three cycles per year. Our program completion goal is 9 students and our transition goal is 7 students. Despite the fact that 42% of our students have incomes below \$5,000 and 75% of our students have incomes at \$15,000 and below, we are now able to keep the majority on their path to postsecondary education.

Outcome Data from before recruitment improvements (2003)

Summer '03		Fall '03	
9 students enrolled	60% of enrollment goal met	12 students enrolled	80% of enrollment goal met
9 students completed	66% of completion goal met	5 students completed	55% of completion goal met
4 students enrolled in college	50 % of transition goal met	3 students enrolled in college	43% of transition goal met

Outcome Data from after recruitment improvements (2007)

Spring '07		Summer '07		Fall '07	
19 students enrolled	127% of enrollment goal met	15 students enrolled	100% of enrollment goal met	25 students enrolled	167% of enrollment goal met
13 students completed	144% of completion goal met	10 students completed	111% of completion goal met	18 students completed	200% of completion goal met
10 students enrolled in college	143% of transition goal met	7 students enrolled in college	100% of transition goal met	12 students enrolled in college	171% of transition goal met

About the Author

Don Sands has worked in the field of adult education for more than 20 years. In 2000, he co-founded X-Cel Adult Education in Boston, and is presently the executive director. For the past five years, he has been the director and counselor for X-Cel's ABE-to-College Transition Program.