

# Trouble Retaining Adults? Consider the TEAM Approach

by DONN FINN, PH.D.

An issue common to adult education programs is retaining learners long enough to help them to reach their goals. Although this can be troublesome, you don't need to go it alone; rather consider the TEAM approach to student retention. Adults are busy and usually operate in multiple roles; among these are employee, spouse, parent, child, and student. Those participating in adult education programs often feel conflicted while balancing these different roles.

**T**ime. This leads to the first component of the TEAM approach: make the learning worth their time. Adults need to weigh the costs of taking time from other roles and using it for their educational pursuits. To borrow a term from the business world, they need to consider the *opportunity cost* of participating in adult education. Frequently they face the possibility of losing pay, spending less time with family, or missing out on a number of other things so they can attend class. It is essential that adult education programs offer relevant curricula with benchmarks to help students gauge their academic progress. If this is not evident, these students may become frustrated and disappear.

**E**ncouragement. For most adults, the largest step they take in their learning journey is the first one. This leads to the second TEAM component for retaining these students: encouragement. Re-entering

school is a huge step, and whether the goal is to learn how to read, work toward a GED, or to pursue a college degree, most adults will face some type of fear. If you want your students to persist, they should know that the classroom is a place where they will be encouraged through all their lessons. It is particularly reassuring to adult students when teachers remind them that many successful learners have come before them and that someday their success story may help another student to persevere. Remember that student retention begins on the first day of class, so be sure your program is welcoming, and never underestimate the power of an encouraging attitude and words.

**A**tmosphere. The most successful classrooms are those with an atmosphere that is conducive for adults to learn. Programs that retain adult learners are often characterized as respecting adults and their ideas, opinions, and experiences. These classrooms often encourage the exchange of experiences and ideas and the promotion of dialogue as part of the instructional process. Although teachers are responsible for establishing a positive atmosphere, maintaining it is the responsibility of all members, including learners.

**M**eaningful. The final element of the TEAM approach to retaining adult learners is making instruction meaningful. At any level, learning new concepts, skills, and ideas can be extremely chal-

lenging, particularly if these concepts, skills and ideas are presented from a perspective foreign to the learner or devoid of any meaningful context. Whenever possible, new concepts should be taught and practiced in a manner consistent with the adult experience. For example, students learning mathematical formulas may be better able to understand them if they are presented using real life contexts, like determining the real cost of an automobile with a loan at 9.5% APR or other examples of personal financial management. Another meaningful approach may be to have students write about personal experiences as a means to discuss history or to practice writing skills. These approaches involve creativity and flexibility by the teacher, but the benefits for the students make the extra effort worthwhile.

Retaining students in adult education programs is an issue that impacts students and programs alike. Integrating the TEAM approach can have a dramatically positive impact on both, so give it a try!

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