

***A CASE STUDY FROM ADULT EDUCATION:
Targeting encourages reflection; reflection produces change***

When the local school district's GED test preparation program suffered a large budget cut, the Mount Auburn Community Action Council (MACAC) stepped in to fill the gap. In a short time, 100 students had enrolled in MACAC's new GED test preparation course. The course promised ungraded, highly interactive training with feedback on problem areas and strengths as well as one-on-one teaching. Based on information found on the internet from an adult education clearinghouse, the MACAC staff set a target of 40 graduates by the end of the first year.

At the end of the first year, only 13 students had completed the GED test preparation course and taken the test. In addition, a substantial number had dropped out of the preparation course. The program director talked to the director of the former GED test preparation course, who was not surprised by the low completion rate. He said, "It's just the way adult education is." Nevertheless, MACAC's GED teachers were not sure they were achieving the best results possible. The program director and the teaching staff agreed to analyze the gap between their target and their Year One outcome.

As a first step, the staff identified students who had dropped out or who had missed a large number of classes. Those students were sent a letter, saying that the MACAC staff was looking for ways to better meet their students' needs. The letter asked for the student's help in the form of a brief interview over the telephone. A few days later, a MACAC staff member called each student.

The interview approach was highly successful. Not only did the telephone conversations provide insights to the staff, the students seemed to appreciate being asked for their input. It became clear from the interviews that a lack of motivation was not a problem. To the contrary, most students were anxious to take the GED test, but they became increasingly frustrated over time by their slow rate of progress. In addition, the classes were scheduled in a way that made attendance burdensome for the many students who had night-shift jobs.

Reflecting on the results of the survey, the teaching staff questioned their policy of providing extensive feedback to students but not grades. The theory had been that being graded might intimidate the students. The teachers realized that a lack of grades meant that students did not see an objective indicator of any increments of progress was made, and might not perceive the progress that the teaching staff could see.

With these insights, the program director and the teaching staff decided on changes that promised to make a significant difference for their students. The hours were changed slightly. They established several intermediate "certificates of accomplishment" as tangible evidence of a student's progress. In addition, a procedure was established for evaluating each student after enrollment and then creating an individual plan that included an estimated time to graduation. The program director and teaching staff thought that the first year target was still appropriate for the following year, and they expected that their program modifications would make the target reachable.