



Retention through Redirection

REPORT

March 2002



College Sector Committee
for Adult Upgrading

Acknowledgements

Helping LBS college learners stay in programs long enough to achieve their goals remains an ongoing challenge and priority for LBS college programs. This was evident by the participation of so many individuals in this project – managers, practitioners, counsellors, support staff, special needs staff and learners. They completed questionnaires, gave us samples of policies and procedures to pore over, and contributed materials that they developed to share with other practitioners in the field. They consulted with us and provided critical feedback as we struggled with definitions, models and processes related to retention and redirection.

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Foreword

This resource provides you, the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) college practitioner, with a redirection protocol to help you reflect on the elements of your program that support student retention, both those that are working well and those that could be working better. The resource is presented as two separate parts to make it easy for you to use.

Part 1 is the **Report**. It provides a summary of the project which includes the rationale for it, the retention research that guided our thinking, the process for gathering information, the key findings and the key recommendations.

Part 2 is the **Protocol**, which consists of seven features. Each feature is described in detail presenting a number of issues and challenges related to learner retention. As much as possible, observations, suggestions, solutions and samples provided by LBS college managers, counsellors, practitioners and learners have been included.

In the Protocol, you will find references for web sites and documents for further research. You will also find activities that link the topic you are reading about to your own program and situation. You may want to take time to complete these as you work through the Protocol; they will help you think about your own retention strategies and redirection efforts.

Icons are used in the Protocol to indicate sources for further information on a particular topic or activities for you to complete. For example:



This icon indicates a reflection exercise.



This icon indicates an interesting web site.



This icon indicates a video to view.



This icon indicates a resource that you might find interesting.



This icon indicates an activity to try.

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT	2
INSTRUMENTAL RESEARCH.....	5
PROCESS FOR GATHERING INFORMATION	7
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	8
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	10
REFERENCES.....	11

Appendices

APPENDIX A: Definition of Redirection

APPENDIX B: Retention Strategies in Place in College LBS Programs

APPENDIX C: Practitioner Questionnaire

APPENDIX D: Learner Questionnaire

Executive Summary

Retention of adult learners remains a complex and puzzling problem for LBS college programs. In spite of increased efforts on goal-setting, and a stronger focus on helping learners review their goals, less than half of the LBS learners in the college setting in 2000/2001 were reported to have achieved their goals. The year-end provincial exit statistics indicated that 35% of them initiated their own withdrawal while another 22% were withdrawn by the college. The statistics also show considerable inconsistency from college to college regarding the numbers of college-initiated withdrawals. Many colleges have a significant withdrawal rate while others withdraw relatively few learners.

The *Retention through Redirection* project extends the retention focus of the *What Works* project, completed in January of 2001. *What Works* identified existing retention strategies and provided new strategies for Ontario Works learners who were at risk of dropping out early in the program. Learners sponsored by Ontario Works made up a significant percentage (38%) of the LBS college enrollment across the province in 2000/2001. While the *Retention through Redirection* project is intended to further support colleges' retention efforts by building on the *What Works* project, the focus is on all LBS learners who remain in the program but continue to be at risk of failing or dropping out.

The main goal of the project was to develop a protocol for redirecting learners. Redirection is defined as a significant change in a learner's goals or route to the goal that leads the learner in a different career, educational, employment or personal direction. Redirection is needed for several reasons and may involve referral to other programs, services, educational institutions or employment agencies. See **Appendix A** for a full definition.

The project gathered information by several means. A number of retention studies and approaches to retention were reviewed. Provincial LBS college year-end statistics and LBS college program policies were examined. Questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews were used to gather information from a variety of sources within the LBS college system. More than 40 individuals from 14 colleges participated by completing questionnaires, sharing materials or taking part in interviews. Seventy-five LBS college learners completed questionnaires. Formal consultations were held with three colleges to elicit feedback on the draft protocol.

The information gathered was used to develop the Redirection Protocol, which consists of seven distinct but interrelated features. They are:

1. An effective means for identifying learners at risk
2. An effective process for helping learners set realistic career and employment goals
3. Policies that establish expectations for attendance, progress and conduct
4. A systematic process for reviewing learners' goals, progress and attendance
5. Strategies to help learners recognize and manage the forces that influence persistence
6. Access to personal, career and academic counselling
7. Awareness of the different types of redirection options available for learners

The Protocol is intended to be part of an overall retention strategy. This strategy needs to consider the LBS program as a whole from entry to exit. The Protocol addresses the problem of high learner withdrawal by exploring issues related to goal-completion. It highlights some of the innovative approaches colleges are currently using to identify and redirect learners at risk. It presents samples of good practice.

Rationale for the Project

Attrition is not unique to LBS college programs. It plagues most educational institutions, but in particular those institutions or programs that serve adult learners. English as a Second Language programs in the United States, for example, lose as many as a third of their adult learners before the end of the second month. (Brod, 1995) Many post secondary institutions are also concerned with their drop-out rates especially during students' first year. At Cambrian College, for example, the Academic Research Sub-Committee recently reviewed the college's retention practices at the post secondary level. As a result of its findings, it proposed that additional research be conducted to investigate areas such as pre-admission testing, time-tabling, and class size. It also made recommendations that all faculty participate in student advising and that one counsellor in the Counselling Services Department have expertise in the area of psycho-social interventions. (Academic Research Sub-Committee, Cambrian College, 2000)

College LBS programs have implemented a variety of innovative retention strategies to respond to the needs of learners. (*What Works Phase 1, 2000*) Some of these strategies include:

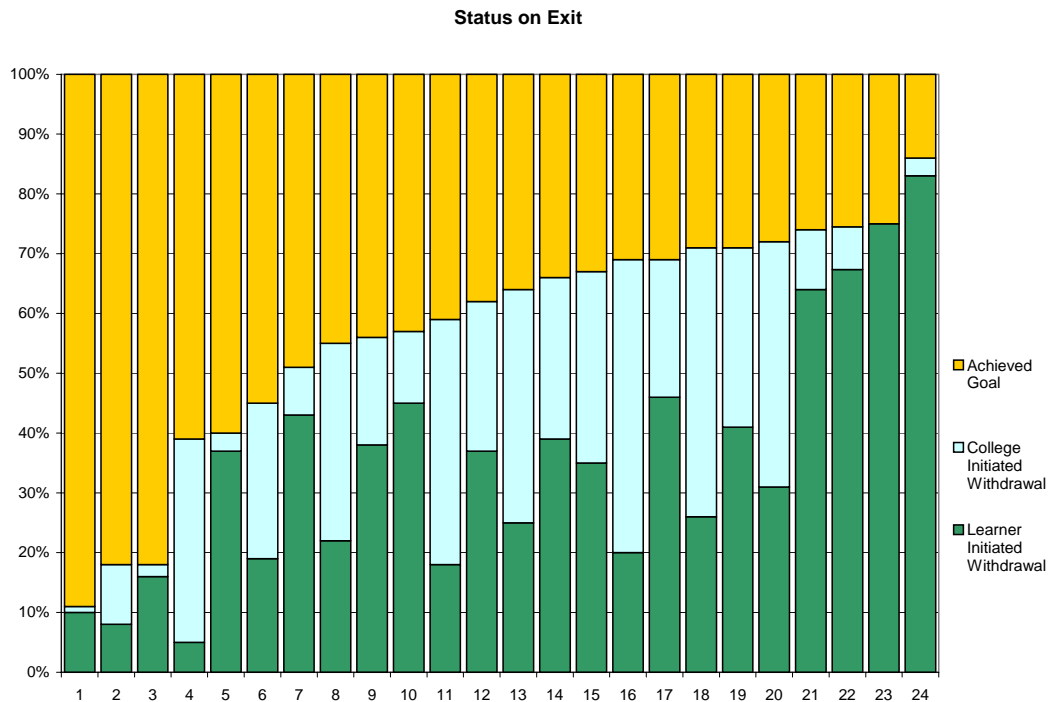
- adapting attendance and lateness policies for young, single mothers
- reducing contact hours so that students can attend to personal commitments but still remain connected to the program
- encouraging part-time or 'flex-time' home study
- creating individual programs that combine community-based and college programs

See **Appendix B** for the complete list.

In spite of efforts such as these, attrition continues to be a problem. The LBS College Year End Provincial Statistics Summary reported by 24 colleges in 2000/2001 revealed that:

- 43% of learners (LBS Levels 1 to 5) achieved their goals
- 22% were withdrawn by the college
- 35% withdrew from the program themselves

When these numbers are broken down college by college, some interesting discrepancies appear.



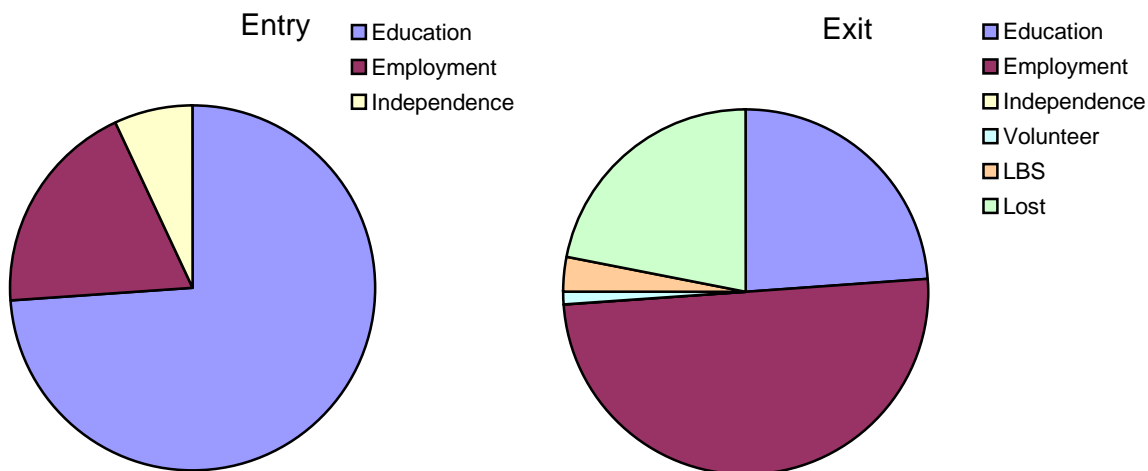
As the graph shows, these averages hide a broad range of results across the province. The number of learners who achieved their goals (represented by gold) varies from 15% to nearly 90%. This discrepancy was explored to a small extent during the consultation phase of the project. We learned there are differences in the ways colleges define learner success. Some colleges, for example, view learner success as achievement of the long-term goal, which for many learners means getting into their post secondary programs. Since these goals may be years away, relatively few learners are able to commit this much time to their education at any one point in their lives. Even though learners might have progressed through one or more LBS levels before exiting a program, they would still not be considered statistically successful. Other colleges define learner success as achievement of the short-term program goal, i.e., what learners can achieve within the time they are prepared to commit to the program.

Another large discrepancy exists in the number of withdrawals (represented by blue and green) from programs last year. This number ranges from 11% in one program to 85% in another. While we cannot explain this discrepancy, we do know that clarification for terms like college-initiated and learner-initiated withdrawal is needed. In *Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need*, Roussy and Hart pose an interesting question, “At what point in time do absent learners become dropouts?” Without more data, it is not even possible to answer questions like this.

Likewise there is a major discrepancy in the numbers of learners who are withdrawn or exited by colleges (represented by blue alone). This number ranges from 0% to 48%. Perhaps we can explain part of this discrepancy. Many college LBS programs have policies in place that specify the reasons for withdrawing learners. They include poor attendance, lack of progress and inappropriate behaviour. It may be that some colleges enforce those policies more aggressively than others. With the exception of colleges that have a very high success rate, though, we know very little about why other colleges withdraw relatively few learners.

While the graph may present an alarming picture of withdrawals (6,471 out of 10,259 learners in 2000/ 2001), it may not be a surprising one to most LBS college practitioners, who see learners struggle with situational and personal barriers on a daily basis.

A second graph raises other questions about goal-setting. Research related to student retention in adult literacy programs consistently emphasizes how critical it is for learners to set achievable, realistic goals. This graph compares two pieces of information – learners’ goals at entry and learners’ goals at exit. It also illustrates a serious discordance. At entry, 74% of learners have further education and training as their goal;



at exit, only 24% remain with this goal. The scenario is reversed for the goal of employment. At entry, 19 % identified employment as their goal; at exit, 50 % identified their goal as employment. This reversal raises important questions. First of all are learners primarily redirecting themselves, or are the programs encouraging learners' redirection to employment? If the programs are supporting this redirection, how is program delivery responding to the needs of the learners? Secondly, is there a correlation between goal reversal and the high attrition rates? Although there isn't sufficient detail in the provincial year-end statistics to answer these questions, individual colleges often maintain detailed records and may be able to answer this question themselves.

Instrumental Research

One important study heavily influenced our thinking about retention. Three years ago the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NSCALL) initiated an in-depth study on learner 'persistence' defining persistence as "adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow." (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999, no pagination)

NSCALL's expanded definition of persistence encourages us think about learning in other contexts besides the classroom. We know that students leave and return to programs on a regular basis. This reality is reflected in LBS program policies, e.g., procedures concerning leaves of absence and stipulations for re-entry. More likely than

not, we tend to view learners who leave and return as dropouts who have restarted. Some LBS college programs, in fact, have special orientations for restarted learners. The NSCALL study challenged us to think rather how these individuals see themselves. Perhaps they see themselves as 'persistent' learners who simply had to 'stop out' for a while to look after personal or financial problems. Perhaps they have a long-term learning plan in place, one that includes other forms of learning such as self-study or involvement in other programs or community agencies.

The accountability system at present encourages a focus on attendance because funding is tied to contact hours. For the most part that attendance is limited to the classroom. The NCSALL study suggests that these ways of defining or measuring persistence may discourage other kinds of learning activities. A broader definition of persistence holds much promise for those learners who, for a variety of reasons, cannot go on to post secondary and will therefore need to be redirected. For learners whose goal is employment, it opens up exciting possibilities for collaboration with other agencies. This issue is explored more fully in the Protocol.

The NSCALL Adult Persistent Study interviewed 150 learners to discover what helped them persist in their studies and what hindered them. Learners' responses were carefully analyzed and trends were recorded. Based on these trends and additional research, four important supports to persistence were identified:

- awareness and management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence
- self-efficacy (represents the feeling of being able to accomplish a task within the context of the literacy program)
- establishment of a goal by the student
- progress toward reaching a goal

The NSCALL study suggests that a combination of all four supports promotes student persistence. These supports, or aspects of these supports, already exist in LBS college programs. In the past few years, there has been an increased focus in the area of goal-setting as part of implementing a learner-centred, goal-directed, outcomes-based model of learning. Programs have experienced many challenges and successes making the transition to this new model. (Barber, 2001) They have also experienced success. By using supports programs we're already familiar with, we felt we could provide practitioners with an opportunity to reflect on how various aspects of their program were working.

The four supports were used, then, as a starting point for gathering information. They also provided a sound philosophical basis for the development of the Redirection Protocol.

Process for Gathering Information

In order to develop a redirection protocol we needed answers to a number of key questions such as:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of learners, practitioners, support staff and administrators in tracking attendance and monitoring learners' progress?
- What constitutes reasonable rates of progress for learners?
- What is the critical point for redirecting learners, e.g., how do you know when the learner's goal is no longer realistic?
- What kinds of options are available for learners who need to be redirected and what are the factors that influence those options?

Our method of gathering information was purely qualitative. For example, we did not attempt to create representative profiles of at-risk learners. Rather we wanted to verify findings from other studies on retention, probe new issues and identify other important questions. We consulted support staff, faculty from the special needs centre, practitioners and a group of 'restarted' learners at Cambrian College through focus groups, questionnaires and personal interviews. We reviewed LBS program policies and procedures that were submitted for our review. In particular, we wanted to identify the key indicators used to show that a learner may be at risk. As anticipated the key indicators are:

- poor attendance
- lack of progress
- inappropriate classroom behaviour

While all three indicators may tell us that a learner is at risk, they do not tell us why.

Two questionnaires were developed based on retention research, college policies and initial feedback from support staff, practitioners, and learners. The practitioners' questionnaire was distributed to all LBS colleges. Over 40 LBS college practitioners from 14 different colleges responded. See **Appendix C** for the practitioners' questionnaire.

The learners' questionnaire was completed by 60 learners who were currently attending Cambrian College at the time the questionnaire was distributed. See **Appendix D** for the learners' questionnaire.

Although the questionnaires were not designed to get corresponding responses, there were questions of sufficient similarity that allowed for some comparative analysis. Both learners and practitioners, for example, were asked to comment on the negative influences that impacted on learners' attendance and rate of progress. Both groups were also asked about time limits for completing the LBS program and how long they thought it should take to complete an LBS level. A summary of the key findings is presented in the following section.

Summary of Findings

Key findings are:

- Learners and LBS college practitioners appear to agree on the two greatest barriers to attendance – family demands and health concerns. Many other barriers were reported.
- Most colleges (12 out of 14) reported that they had strategies in place to address attendance or were in the process of developing strategies. Five were less sure about their effectiveness.
- Poor attendance and the presence of learning disabilities were cited by practitioners as the main reasons for learners' lack of academic progress. Only 60% (36 out of 60) of learners surveyed, however, felt that attendance was closely linked to rate of progress. Learners also reported that teachers were the most important overall positive influence in helping them make progress in their LBS programs. Nearly half referred to the important role of the teacher in encouraging, supporting and guiding them.
- The maximum amount of time that practitioners felt it should take a learner to complete an LBS level ranged from 1.5 months to a year. Several stressed that this was a very individualized situation and that many factors had to be considered. Many learners agreed.

- The maximum amount of time that practitioners felt learners should be allowed to remain in a program ranged from 1.25 years of uninterrupted learning to no limit. Most argued that exceptions needed to be made for special cases. Nearly three quarters of the learners who responded felt that they should be given a time limit to complete their programs, but that the needs of the individual also had to be considered.
- There was much discussion about learners' goals, but a majority of practitioners felt that learners stay with unrealistic goals for too long. About half felt that learners (most, many, some) were reluctant to change their goals. Nearly half of the learners (29 out of 60) said they were somewhat willing or not willing to change their goals and the focus of their upgrading.
- Eighteen practitioners felt they had developed an effective means to help learners review their goals. Most included regularly scheduled progress review meetings. A majority of practitioners felt learners' goals should be reviewed every two to three months.
- There was general support that attendance, progress and terms for withdrawal, be addressed in a retention protocol. Several other suggestions were offered.

These findings have been instrumental in shaping the Redirection Protocol. While we had some notion at the outset what the protocol might look like, the specific suggestions provided by practitioners and learners helped us identify seven distinct but interrelated features. Practitioners were concerned that the Protocol be flexible and sensitive. They urged us to move cautiously. They wanted assurance that redirection was in the best interests of the learners. Learners, we discovered, shared their concerns. For these reasons, the Protocol is descriptive rather than prescriptive. By focusing on features, we hope to help practitioners reflect on elements of their own processes that are working well and those that could be working better.

Recommendations

Following is a list of recommendations that you, as LBS college practitioners, might consider:

1. Review how goal-achievement is defined by your program. Consult with other LBS college programs to see if they have the same understanding.
2. Develop a definition for retention based on a clear understanding of goal achievement, and use it to measure the effectiveness of your retention strategies and approaches.
3. Initiate discussions within your programs to determine reasonable expectations for satisfactory progress by learners. Pay special attention to learners whose goals are not post secondary. Focus attention on goal-setting strategies for learners at lower levels. Share findings with other colleges.
4. Identify issues related to learner and college-initiated withdrawal. Share issues with other colleges to ensure consistent statistical reporting.
5. Review your program policies to ensure that they are firm, fair, clear and complete.
6. Use the activities in the Redirection Protocol to develop or evaluate your own protocol.
7. Establish a Retention Team in your program with clear lines of responsibilities. Consider how learners can be involved.

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