What Works

Recruitment and Retention
of Ontario Works Clients - Phase 2

January 2001

What Works: Recruitment and Retention of Ontario Works Clients
Phase 2 Report

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Acknowledgements

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

The purpose of the project, *What Works: Recruitment and Retention of Ontario Works Clients* was to improve the overall participation and commitment of clients in Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) college programs. The project consisted of two phases. Phase 1 studied the impact that increased numbers of Ontario Works clients had on LBS college programs, and gathered information on existing retention strategies used in colleges. It served as a starting point in developing a profile of the Ontario Works client. This profile showed Ontario Works clients facing a number of major obstacles that prevented them from participating in and staying in school.

LBS college programs have responded to the needs of Ontario Works clients in a number of ways. Some approaches have met with more success than others. Because learners' and practitioners' needs were so varied, it was a serious challenge for the researchers to narrow their strategies to three. The researchers based their selection of topics for further development and field testing on the following information:

- The concerns and needs of the learners gathered from focus group discussions and further research on the Ontario Works program
- Needed strategies identified by LBS college practitioners from questionnaires and interviews
- Concentrated research in areas of retention such as locus of control

One important piece of retention research heavily influenced the direction of the project-the first three weeks of a program are critical in motivating and retaining learners. Quigley ([1] p. 1) Learners, in fact, are most likely to drop out during the first three weeks. Early identification of possible barriers to participation and subsequent intervention for at-risk learners are therefore essential. The researchers decided to focus their strategies on the at-risk Ontario Works learner which also meant focusing on the first few weeks of the learner's involvement in the LBS college program. All three strategies were developed for use in the intake/assessment/orientation process where it was felt they would be most effective. The three strategies were outlined in the Phase 1 Preliminary Report, which was completed and distributed in June 2000.

They are:

- Retention Strategy # 1 - Learning Alert: A Learning Disabilities Quick Screen
- Retention Strategy # 2 - Learners Helping Learners: Setting Up Focus Groups for Learners
- Retention Strategy # 3 - Screening for Success: A Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen

In Phase 2, the researchers piloted and refined these strategies and developed an information piece to accompany them. From piloting the strategies themselves, the researchers felt they would benefit all LBS learners, not just those sponsored by Ontario Works. They were also concerned that Ontario Works clients would feel "singled out" as the sole participants in the field test. By involving other LBS learners, moreover, the researchers could attempt some comparative analysis to investigate practitioners' observations that Ontario Works clients had more serious barriers and greater needs than did other LBS learners. In approaching the colleges to participate in the field test, therefore, the researchers indicated that the retention strategies could be used more broadly. Judging by the level of participation, this approach seems to have been a good one.

Sixteen practitioners from eight colleges invited learners to try one of the quick screens or participate in a focus group. Over 360 completed strategies were returned to the researchers. This

high level of participation by the colleges was consistent with participation in Phase 1 where eighteen colleges contributed information through surveys and interviews.

The field test results indicate very strong support for all three strategies, with practitioners and learners agreeing overall on their need and potential value. As anticipated, there was somewhat less agreement on issues relating to their use and on the effectiveness of the actual tools themselves. Practitioners raised the issue of timing, e.g., at what point in the program would the Self- Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen be most helpful for at-risk learners? Practitioners also raised sensitivity issues related to the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen although learners seemed much less concerned that questions were personal or embarrassing. The response to focus groups was mixed. While practitioners were enthusiastic about the results, they also identified some challenges involved in facilitating such groups.

The field test results showed how important it was to include background information that explained why and how each strategy was developed. This information included relevant resources and web sites which practitioners found useful. One commented, "It (the material) was helpful and interesting. It gave the project some depth."

Several practitioners commented that the strategies were indeed applicable to all LBS learners. The detailed results for each strategy are presented in the following three sections of the report. The two quick screens were considerably revised based on the analysis of the field test results and specific suggestions from practitioners and learners. No major changes were made to the focus group strategy. Background information has been revised slightly to encourage a broader use of the strategies. Most references to Ontario Works clients, for example, have been replaced with "at-risk learners." The background information and revised tools can be found in the appendices at the end of the report.

Retention Strategy # 1 - Learning Alert: A Learning Disabilities Quick Screen

Summary of Learner Feedback

Of the 211 learners who completed the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen, 35% or 73 learners reported missing grades. Nine reported missing more than one grade. Elementary grades in general were missed more frequently (68 elementary grades were missed compared to 14 high school grades). Grades 1 and 2 were missed most frequently. Five learners also reported failing kindergarten.

In explaining why they had missed grades, 33% said they had trouble keeping up with their studies, while 55% or 40 learners checked off "other" reasons. The Quick Screen did not ask learners to specify "other," but a few offered reasons anyway.

(Actual comments are in Italics.)

Reasons
- *slacked off*
- *moved from a French to an English school*
- *needed glasses*
- *too lazy*

It is apparent that these kinds of comments are critical in helping practitioners decide whether further assessment is needed. The Quick Screen has been revised to elicit this information.

Thirty eight percent (38%) remember getting help (mainly from a special-ed teacher), but only 15% reported being tested. Twenty-two percent (22%) or 45 learners said they were told they had a learning disability.Most were told by their teachers, family members or doctors. Seventeen percent (17%) reported that another family member had also been diagnosed with a learning disability.

Learners were also asked how much they knew about their learning strengths/weaknesses and about learning disabilities in general. The results are presented in a table below:

	Not very much	An average amount	Quite a bit
Learning strengths/weaknesses	12%	51%	37%
Learning disabilities	32%	50%	17%

This Quick Screen was administered to new and currently enrolled students so it is not known how much the latter group may have already learned about their own learning strengths and weaknesses. Although half the learners reported they knew an average amount in both categories, it would seem that learners would benefit from knowing more.

Of the 211 learners who completed the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen, an overwhelming majority (96% or 201 students) agreed that it was a good idea to know if they had a learning disability early on in their program. Slightly fewer (86%) considered it to be a valuable activity while 84% reported they understood the purpose of the Quick Screen. It is interesting to note that of the 186 learners who responded to both of these questions, 16 or 8.5% claimed to have found

the Quick Screen valuable although they did not understand its purpose. The researchers did not anticipate this response.

Comments from Learners Who Were Supportive of the Quick Screen

- *know what pace to work at*
- *People can get extra help if they need it.*
- *You know where you stand.*
- *It helps people who may not even know they need help.*
- *gives a person a chance to get help early*
- *an easy way to find out anybody with a disability*
- *The teacher would understand the student better.*

Comments from Learners Who Were <u>Less</u> Supportive of the Quick Screen

- *not personally valuable*
- *not many questions to answer*
- *I didn't really see the relevance in my situation. However for others I could see it being relevant.*
- *didn't accomplish anything*
- *Why not ask all the questions you need to know at one time?*

Only 6% of the learners found questions in the Quick Screen to be personal or embarrassing, and the average time it took for learners to complete it was 5.9 minutes. This time also included completing the evaluation form. Although most of the learners who provided comments liked the tool the way it was, a few offered suggestions.

Suggestions for Improving the Tool

- *more precise. Give us more room to write what we think.*
- *I think it pretty much covers everything, but there should be a more detailed follow up for those that might have a learning disability.*
- *OK but should provide a few more details on the questions.*
- *too short, not enough depth*
- *Leave room for comments after each question.*
- *Use coloured paper.*

Learners who wanted the tool to be more comprehensive may not have understood that the Quick Screen was meant to followed up with a more thorough diagnostic assessment. The section that refers to further testing in the introduction has been highlighted to draw learners' attention to it. In addition, space was added for learners to make further comments. The suggestion to use coloured paper was an excellent one. Other learning disabled students have reported that white paper produces a glare or makes the words "jump off the page."

Although this project focused on Ontario Works clients, practitioners were encouraged to use the Quick Screen with other LBS learners. Only 147 (of 211) learners identified their sponsorship and of those, 36% or 56 learners were sponsored by Ontario Works. Although Ontario Works does not require clients with learning disabilities to attend school, the percentage of Ontario Works learners with self-disclosed learning disabilities was still high (19%) compared to other sponsored learners (23%).

Summary of Practitioner Feedback

Nine practitioners/counsellors/academic advisors field-tested the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen with 211 learners. Their experiences and observations are described below.

How helpful was the background information?
- not very helpful 0
- fairly helpful 1
- helpful 4
- very helpful 4

Where did you use the Quick Screen?
- in initial assessmen/intake 5
- in ongoing assessment 7

How did you use the Quick Screen with your learners?
- in a one-to-one situation 2
- in a small group situation 8

How would you describe learners' overall reaction to the Quick Screen?
- not very positive 1
- somewhat positive 1
- positive 7
- very positive 0

These results generally support the learners' overall positive response to the Quick Screen.

In what ways could the Quick Screen be improved?
- provide a more detailed explanation 2
- use a larger font 1
- add a question that would isolate the slow learner 1

Perhaps a more detailed explanation would have helped the 16 % of learners who said they had trouble understanding the purpose of the Quick Screen, but there were other probable factors (e.g., reading levels, time limits) that affected understanding. Rather than expand the introduction, the researchers acted on the second suggestion by reformatting the Quick Screen. A question was also added to help differentiate the slower learner from the learner with learning disabilities.

Comments
- Some learners were reluctant to put their names on the forms.
- Some learners felt the questions were too personal.

Do you feel that other questions should be added?

- yes 1
- no 6

Is your overall awareness of learning disabilities better now than it was before participating in this field test?

- yes 4
- no 5

Comments

- *I'm more aware of the number of learners who feel they may have some type of deficit.*
- *helpful to have a quick tool that can act as a flag*
- *more aware of the complexities involved with learning disabilities*
- *Yes, I'm also involved in the LDAO provincial training and it's difficult to say whether working with the field test was a factor.*
- *The Quick Screen did not provide additional general knowledge.*

Do you feel that helping learners explore the possibility of having a learning disability early on in the LBS program, and recommending a more in depth assessment has potential as a useful retention strategy?

- yes 8
- no 1

Comments

- *Letting students know that we are concerned about their individual situation is always helpful; it gives students that necessary hope.*
- *The earlier a student is assessed with learning disabilities, the better chance a student has of achieving their goals and being successful.*
- *Students then deal with these needs in a productive way rather than stumbling along with an unidentified, untreated handicap.*
- *It helps the frustration level that both the teacher and the student have when there is a learning disability present but not diagnosed.*
- *Many have been identified by the time they come to LBS programs, and screening at this level should provide a successful outcome.*

Do you plan to use the Quick Screen (or a modified version of it) for initial or ongoing assessment?

- yes 6
- no 2
- unsure 1

Summary Highlights

Interest in the learning disabilities strategy was high judging by the number of practitioners who chose to field-test it. Nine practitioners used the Quick Screen with over 200 learners. This interest may be partly due to the provincial focus on learning disabilities and upcoming opportunities for professional development through the Learning Disabilities Practitioner Training Project.

Learners were generally more positive about the actual tool than were practitioners although both strongly supported its overall purpose. Both groups also strongly agreed that it was important for learners to explore the possibility of having a learning disability early on in the LBS program. Recommendation # 9 in the student success draft report by Bainbridge confirms these findings, "That testing for learning disabilities be initiated during initial assessment." ([2] p. VII)

Both learners and practitioners offered suggestions for improving the Quick Screen. One of the researchers who had been attending the provincial training on learning disabilities, asked for suggestions from other participants as well. See **Appendix 1** for the Strategy # 1 and **Appendix 1A** for the revised tool. The strategy (**p. 3**) contains more detailed guidelines for interpreting results.

Only four practitioners felt their overall awareness of learning disabilities was greater as a result of participating in the field test. At least two practitioners did not receive the background information which included a description of how the Quick Screen was developed and a list of web sites featuring different learning disabilities screening tools. The others who received it reported that it was helpful. Each participating site also received a copy of the manual, *Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilitie*s, although there may have been circulation problems in colleges where more than one practitioner was involved. The researchers do not know if practitioners had sufficient time to review the manual. Whether or not these factors affected practitioner's responses, it is apparent that LBS practitioners want and need more extensive training in the area of learning disabilities.

Retention Strategy # 2 - Learners Helping Learners: Setting Up Focus Groups for Learners

Overview

Although the researchers considered Strategy # 2 the most compelling and potentially rewarding one of all, they were not surprised that only three colleges field-tested it. Having piloted it themselves in Phase 1, the researchers felt other practitioners might be reluctant to try it. First of all, significantly more time was required to plan and facilitate the groups. Secondly, more risk and commitment were involved-both for learners and facilitators.

Two colleges initiated one focus group each while the third initiated two. The topics, purpose, size and make-up of the groups varied considerably all of which demonstrated the versatility of this strategy. Two focus groups, for example, consisted of Ontario Works clients only, while the other involved a mixed group. Overall results indicate this retention strategy has great potential for sensitizing practitioners to learners' barriers, needs and concerns. Specific information gathered through the focus groups, for instance, was reported to:

- identify specific recruitment issues for Ontario Works clients
- show that having regular focus groups would be valuable activity
- help improve attendance for LBS students who had a history of poor attendance
- provide direction for the LBS program to enhance new students' sense of belonging
- encourage LBS students to find their own solutions to many of the additional demands placed on them by Ontario Works

The outcomes for each focus group are described in detail in the following pages. It is hoped that learners' comments will help other practitioners "see" the overall value of using focus groups and motivate them to try one. Because the responses to this strategy varied greatly in how and how much information was reported, the descriptions do not follow a consistent format. The first one, for example, carefully examines learners' responses and systematically explores their implications, while the other two discuss implications in a more general way.

Focus Group A

Purpose

- to explore those factors that affect an Ontario Works client's decision to participate in or avoid an adult literacy program.
- to gather data to make informed decisions for both the Ontario Works Retention Factors Project and the LBS Program.

Participants

- seven participants selected by OW caseworkers who had indicated some interest in improving their literacy skills
- two facilitators from the LBS college program

Question # 1 - What do you already know about the adult literacy program at the college?

(Clients' actual responses are in Italics.)

Responses

Only one student knew what we actually did. The others had no knowledge about our program and came to the meeting with the expectation of learning more. The ensuing discussion also brought to light some confusion about who provided what literacy services.

Implications

We need to provide printed marketing information that clearly differentiates what we do from what other literacy providers do, e.g., what makes us unique and where we fit in the continuum of literacy services available.

Question # 2 - What would need to be in place that would make you feel comfortable enough to want to attend the literacy program at the College?

Response # 1

- *doing adult work and not wasting my time* (this Ontario Works client had a negative experience while attending an employment help centre)

Implications
It is important that teachers validate adult learner's perceptions of what they are being asked to do and their understanding of how the learning activity relates to their overall goal.

Response # 2

- *feeling part of the group and not isolated*

Implications
We should explore with the faculty different ways of enhancing new students' sense of belonging. Perhaps in addition to having a faculty adviser, a student should be paired up with other students who share common interests or who have had similar life experiences. Maybe one of the learning activities could be to explore what's available to enrich and/or broaden their social lives while at the college and to share this information with others either through discussion or through writing, e.g., class newsletter.

Response # 3

- *Being treated with respect by younger students in other college programs. When younger students look at me funny or say something about my age, I just leave.*

Implications
It is not certain whether this is an actual problem faced by other adult learners or just the perceptions of this particular person. This should be validated and explored further. If it is an issue, then it should be addressed in some way.

Response # 4

- *I find the labs/classrooms too noisy.*

- *I'm not comfortable when there are too many people around me.*

Implications
Perhaps there is a need to remind both teachers and students that all learners have individual environmental needs when it comes to learning and that they need to respect one another's different needs. Alternatively, we should explore having quieter areas for those who require it.

In terms of "too many people," the option we presented was to do the initial goals exploration, individual training plan development, and program orientation off site, downtown. This would then be followed up by a tour and day visit to the college LBS program. Those present thought this would be a good idea and indicated a willingness to attend a follow up meeting to implement this process.

Response # 5

- *I need a chance to show what I can do. People have a lot of potential they don't know about.*
- *It was nice to have people listen to us and listen to what we need.*

Implications
These comments show that adults need to perceive that they have a voice and that someone cares about what they have to say. We need to remember this both when teaching and when recruiting new learners. In addition these comments show that having regular focus groups is a valuable activity.

Question # 3 - What are some of the things getting in the way of your starting at the college or staying in the program once you are there?

Response # 1
Travel time by bus and the time between buses can be anywhere from one half to two hours.

Implications
Do buses run frequently enough? Is this an issue for other students as well? Is the solution to deliver literacy off site on a regular basis at a location that is convenient for the majority of students?

Response # 2
The times that classes start and end make a difference. Starting after 9:00 a.m. and ending before 3:30 p.m. is a plus for those who have to drop off and pick up school age children.

Implications
Our time tabling already allows for this. The suggestion of night classes was not received positively. Several participants indicated that they had other obligations, which would prevent them from attending evenings.

Response # 3

- *The college is so large it's easy to get lost.*

Implications
Most participants indicated that a map and a tour would be helpful. In addition, I think pairing new learners with established learners would help the transition to college life, as well as aid retention.

Perhaps the tour could be supplemented with a video or virtual tour that would give potential learners a preview of what to expect.

A follow up focus group was planned for early January to discuss goals exploration, present level and levels required by goals, map and preview of tour of college, etc.

Focus Group B

Purpose

- to explore those factors that affected Ontario Works clients' initial participation in the LBS college program
- to brainstorm ways that Ontario Works students can help themselves

Participants

- six Ontario Works students who volunteered to participate in a one-hour focus group
- two facilitators

Question # 1 - What barriers did you experience as an Ontario Works sponsored student when you first started your program at the college?

(Clients' actual responses are in Italics.)

Responses

- *There's a lot of pressure to finish school within a short timeframe.*
- *They (the caseworkers) don't know what realistic progress is.*

Clients reported that they had not been pressured to pursue their education. They did feel, however, that Ontario Works caseworkers put pressure on them once they were at school. One mentioned that some caseworkers were not happy with clients' progress.

- *There's no money for transportation at the beginning and no money for school supplies or clothes at all. Ontario Works should help with winter clothing. Kids get it but not adults. If we were working instead of going to school, we'd get clothing.*
- *Caseworkers don't always tell you what is available. They make you feel you have to ask for a handout.*

Participants felt that some of the Ontario Works caseworkers needed better training.

Question # 2 - Name some of the barriers you have overcome and how you overcame them.

Responses

- *get to class on a daily basis*

One student commented that it was difficult to get to class on a daily basis, but that she had a clear and achievable goal-to get a good job and get off social assistance. That's what kept her going.

Another had a young child and was not required to attend. She chose to attend the LBS program so that she could give her child and herself a better future. She reported that her attendance was good although she was offended by the caseworker's constant emphasis on attendance.

Question # 3 - How many of you feel that your caseworker and you work well together?

<u>Responses</u>

- *Good. She never harasses or pressures me, and allows me to go at my own pace.*
- *We get along all right and can talk.*

A third mentioned that he doesn't have a relationship with his caseworker at all. A fourth did not trust his caseworker and was upset that he had to reapply for social assistance every six months. He said that he would like a second opinion on some of the information the caseworker provided.

Question # 4 - What are some things your caseworker does or could do to help you participate more fully in the program?

<u>Responses</u>

- *give us money up front for school supplies and transportation*
- *encourage us*
- *tell us what other services they (Ontario Works) offer*

This learner wanted information about other services that Ontario Works provides such as workshops on stress-management and budgeting.

Question # 5 - What are some things you do or can do to help you participate more fully in the LBS program?

<u>Responses</u>

- *become part of a good student support group*
- *maintain a positive attitude and try not to focus on what the caseworker needs*
- *The atmosphere in class is important.*

Question # 6 - What are some ways to help other Ontario Works clients in the LBS program who may be too shy or lacking in self-confidence to attend a focus group like this?

<u>Responses</u>

- *Students need to be told that what they are feeling is normal.*
- *role models-other students who have been successful, maybe they could come into the classrooms on occasions as guest*
- *have them see the counsellor once a month*

One participant suggested a peer-support or mentoring system. Ceremonies and celebrations for successes and achievements were mentioned as ways to provide incentives and support. Social support outside school was also mentioned.

Notes from Observation Log

Although the facilitators attempted to maintain a positive focus on identifying issues and solving problems, the discussion took a negative turn near the wrap-up when participants spoke about their treatment at the Ontario Works office. Although their concerns were legitimate, there wasn't sufficient time to deal with them. The facilitators then asked the group if ongoing focus groups would be a good way to provide support to Ontario Works students and if so would they be willing to attend another session. While two were very enthusiastic about attending another focus group, the others were hesitant. Rather than schedule another focus group for the following week, the facilitators felt they needed to explore ways that groups could be built directly into the program (e.g., during orientation) or on a weekly basis. This represents a challenge for larger LBS college programs and will require input from several stakeholders, i.e., teachers, administrators and other learners.

Group Dynamics: The discussion was somewhat dominated by two participants. Although both were enthusiastic and positive, it meant that others who required more time to formulate their thoughts participated less. This was supported by the responses to Question 3 of the Learners' Evaluation Form (see following section).

Areas of agreement: Participants felt they needed help with startup costs and more support and information from their caseworkers.

Other observations: Although one participant did not articulate it explicitly, he seemed to feel strongly that the college should assume an advocacy role with regard to Ontario Works sponsored students.

Learner's Feedback from Evaluation Form

1. Do you understand the purpose of the Focus Groups?
  - yes 6

2. How many focus group sessions did you attend?
  - 1 focus group 5 (one participant had also attended the pilot focus group back in June)

3. How much do you feel you contributed to the focus groups?
  - not very much 2   • about average 2   • quite a bit 2

4. Overall how helpful did you find the focus groups?
  - not helpful 0   • somewhat helpful 1   • helpful 3   • very helpful 1
  One commented that she needed to see the results.

5. In what ways did the focus groups help you the most?
  - by letting out some common stress
  - by talking to others
  - by having some questions answered
  - by discovering that you're not the only one with worries and problems
  - by getting frustrations out in the open
  - by giving my point of view and expressing myself

6. In what other ways do you feel they could have helped you more?
- by providing answers
- by reporting any changes in Ontario Works would help benefit clients
- by calling the caseworker and getting a second opinion

7. How important do you think focus groups and support groups are in the LBS program?
- not important 0   • somewhat important 1 • important 3 • very important 2

8. Please provide suggestions for how this activity could be improved.
- more meetings (2 responses) • getting a response to our questions and requests

9. Do you have any other comments about participating in this activity?
- *have focus groups more often, maybe outside of our class schedule*
- *It was helpful.*

Practitioners' Evaluation of the Focus Groups

The background information on the focus groups and the Facilitator's Checklist were both considered helpful. In rating different elements of the focus groups, the two facilitators reported they were "very successful" in sensitizing them to the needs of the learners, while "successful" in helping learners seek solutions to problems and in helping them support one another. Learners' overall involvement was described as "very positive" and the facilitators said they planned on using focus groups again.

Focus Group C

(Two focus groups were initiated at this college)

Purpose

- to explore reasons for non-attendance
- to brainstorm ideas/solutions to resolve the issues relating to non-attendance

Participants

- LBS learners who had attendance problems. Approximately twenty-one were asked to attend the focus group. Fifteen showed up and included a good mix of male and female. All were invited to return the following week. Ten returned.
- two facilitators

Issues Raised

Participants identified errors in tracking attendance. Daycare was also identified as a major issue affecting attendance. Groups brainstormed ways to help improve attendance. This worked well. Positive role models really helped.

Group Dynamics

The first group was very positive. It broke into smaller groups which promoted discussion. The second focus group got derailed. The verbal promoters were not there to maintain the positive tone. Other issues were brought up. The large group was reluctant to break into smaller groups.

Observations

The general reaction of the attending and non-attending students to the focus groups was very interesting. The first group of students felt "singled out" because they had been specifically asked to attend the focus group to discuss attendance issues. When the second focus group took place, the reaction was that students who had not been invited felt "left out."

Recommendations

Focus groups should be part of the ongoing program because they provide a reflective opportunity for students that is not provided in the current program.

Practitioners' Evaluation of the Focus Groups

The background information on the focus groups and the Facilitator's Checklist were both considered helpful. In rating different elements of the focus groups, the two facilitators reported they were "somewhat successful" in sensitizing them to the needs of the learners, while "successful" in helping learners seek solutions to problems and in helping them support one another. Learners' overall involvement was described as "varied." The facilitators reported that the learners who participated in the focus groups had a "better understanding of our concern for them and the resources that are available." The facilitators also offered anecdotal evidence of improved attendance as a result of the focus groups, but that they would further need to link the focus

groups to attendance and make a proper comparative analysis. The facilitators noted they planned on using focus groups again.

Summary Highlights

A specific goal for Retention Strategy # 2 was to help practitioners discover from learners themselves what would help them stay in school. On that basis alone this strategy was considered successful. Direct information was gathered that helped participating practitioners gain a deeper understanding of the complex and highly personal issues related to retention. Although only three colleges chose to field-test this particular strategy, at least two other colleges mentioned they already use focus groups in an informal way. Focus groups, in fact, have been built into their program so that students have an ongoing opportunity or forum to identify program issues and raise personal concerns. Practitioners who field-tested this strategy were enthusiastic about the benefits and potential benefits of focus groups both in recruitment (Focus Group A), and retention (Focus Groups B and C). All six practitioners reported that they planned to continue using them. No suggestions were offered to revise the actual strategy itself, and therefore no major revisions were made. See **Appendix 2** for Strategy #2.

Observations about the use of focus groups were noted by both piloting and non-piloting practitioners. One practitioner remarked, "Focus groups demand really good facilitation skills." This was apparent in Focus Groups Band C where one group became stalled (looking for new direction) and the other, derailed (learners were reluctant to break into smaller groups). Another practitioner who was an experienced group leader of self-help groups noted that focus groups would be "a great complement" to the program, but that the leader/facilitator needed to be someone neutral for the same reasons that that one chooses a neutral counsellor for psychological issues, "It is difficult to open up to someone with whom you have a relationship with outside the group."

A concern was also noted about whether focus groups should be used as a support mechanism for Ontario Works students. One practitioner commented, "Ontario Works students may not want to be sharing personal information with other Ontario Works students (because of issues of trust arising from complex interrelationships and rivalries)." Although the practitioner recognized the value of focus groups, she felt that it was better to refer learners to groups in the community.

Retention Strategy # 3 - Screening for Success: A Self- Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen

Summary of Learner Feedback

Of the 136 learners who completed the Quick Screen, 100% of the 132 students who responded to question 2 considered self-management/self-direction skills to be an important part of the LBS program. Ninety-seven (97%) of the133 of the learners who responded to Question 3 felt that self-management skills would help them succeed in their LBS programs. Slightly fewer or 89% of the 116 learners who responded to Question 5 considered the Quick Screen to be a valuable activity while 86% reported that they understood its purpose. It is Interesting to note that of the 109 learners who answered both these questions, 10 of them or 9.3% claimed to have found the Quick Screen valuable although they did not understand its purpose. As with the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen, the researchers did not anticipate this response.

(Actual comments are in Italics.)

Comments of Learners Who Felt It Was a Valuable Activity

- *helps you learn about yourself when marking the boxes*
- *makes me think of what I have to do*
- *It's good to take a look at the person inside every so often.*
- *(helps to) understand yourself better*
- *helps me to identify what I'm presently capable of regarding self-direction and what I need to work on to achieve my goals*
- *It's good because it makes you think of what's ahead of you in the future.*
- *It gave me a clear view of my capabilities and incapabilities.*
- *helps me learn in different ways*

Comments of Learners Who Felt It Was <u>Not</u> a Valuable Activity

- *It just seems to be another obstacle away from the usual education.*
- *Based on my own opinion, I already know my own assets.*
- *I don't understand what it's about.*
- *Most people here know how they are so why screen it?*
- *It was pointless.*
- *It wasted my time - I have done more than enough things like this and really don't want to see one more.*

This last comment points to the need to use the Quick Screen selectively, although it is not certain whether this particular learner was new or had been in the program for some time.

By averaging the total number of performance indicators for each of the eleven features/skills sets, it was possible to determine the strongest and weakest skills sets. The strongest two were in the areas of Self-Assessment/Self-Reflection (average,70.8%) and Working with Others (67.3%). The two weakest were Problem-Solving Skills (56.6%) and Personal Advocacy/Self-Motivation (58.3%). The difference between them, however, was not significant. This is encouraging since the relatively even distribution indicates no serious overall gaps for the group of 136 learners.

Graphing the individual performance indicators within the skills sets, however, illustrates greater differences in learners' specific self-identified strengths and weaknesses.

SMSD Quick Screen Student Responses

A 60.8%   B 58.3%   C 56.6%   D 70.8%   E 67.3%   F 61.9%   G 59.9%   H 62.3%   I 59.0%   J 65.1%   K 64.0%
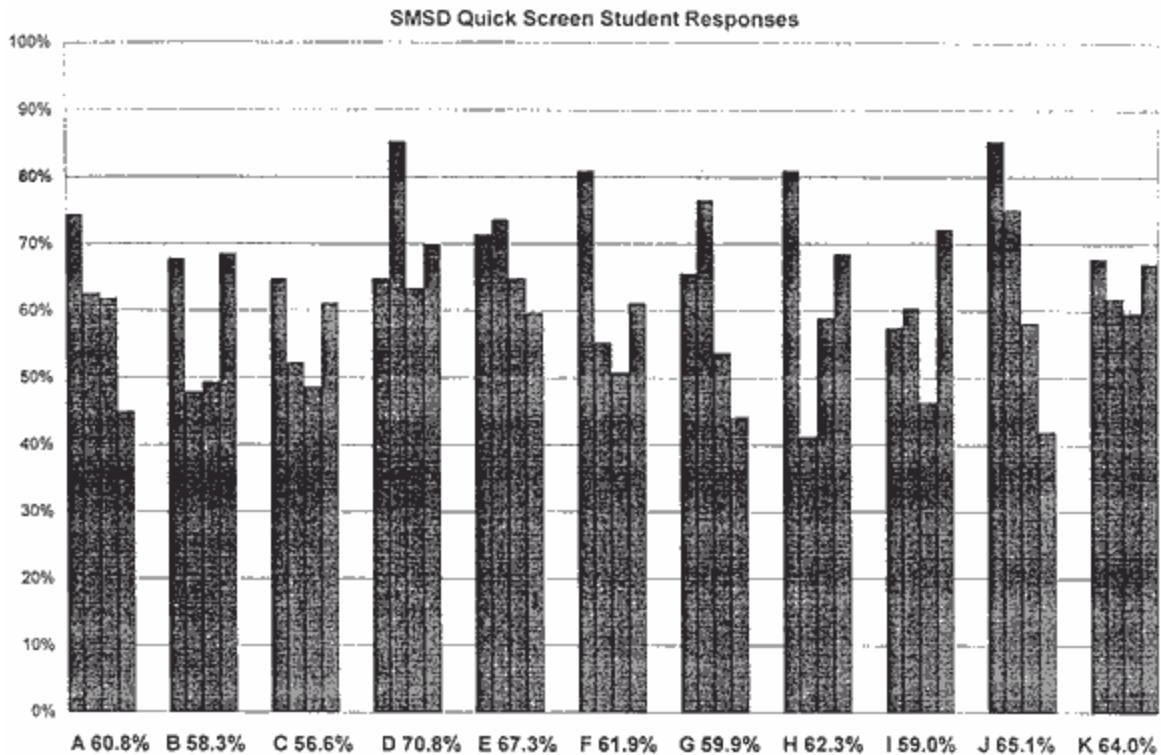
The Four Strongest Skills According to the Graph (over 80%)

- I know when I have done well (or not well on an assignment)
- I feel that attendance and punctuality are necessary for program success
- I recognize the importance of setting goals
- I am usually able to think my way through things

The Four Weakest Skills According to the Graph (45% or under)

- I am able to clearly explain and get my ideas across to others
- I try to plan my work and assignments ahead-by the week, month or even a year
- I use different strategies to improve my memory
- I participate actively in a variety of tasks and activities

While the even distribution of individual performance indicators within Skills Set K (Adaptability), for example, showed that learners performed fairly consistently, the uneven distribution in Skills Set J (Time-Management and Organization) indicated otherwise. A more thorough examination of this skills set pointed out interesting discrepancies. One of the performance indicators was not a valid example since it asked the learner to comment on his/her "feelings" about the skill (I feel that attendance and punctuality are necessary for program success) rather than on his/her actual performance. Another indicator in this same skills set appeared to be related more to responsibility and program commitment than time-management and organization. These two indicators were replaced with more appropriate ones. The second performance indicator in Skills Set H, which had to do more with speaking than thinking, was similarly revised. The graph was very effective in flagging these important discrepancies thereby helping the researchers improve the self-management tool. See **Appendix 3** for Strategy # 3 and **Appendix 3A** for the revised tool.

It was not the purpose of the project to do a comparative study. Although this project focused on Ontario Works clients, practitioners had been encouraged to use the strategies with other LBS learners. This did allow the researchers to compare individual performance indicators checked by Ontario Works students with those of non-Ontario Works learners. One hundred and twenty (120) learners identified their sponsorship and of those, 39% or 47 learners were sponsored by Ontario Works. Although the samples were large enough, they were not representative (only 7 colleges participated in this strategy). Uncontrolled variables, furthermore, did not allow the researchers to justify a formal statistical analysis. The data do, however, suggest some probable conclusions. Discounting the indicators that varied by 10% or less, 16 indicators favoured the non-Ontario Works learners while only 5 favoured the Ontario Works learners. See the following graph.

Quick Screen Response: Ontario Works Students (-) and non-OW Students
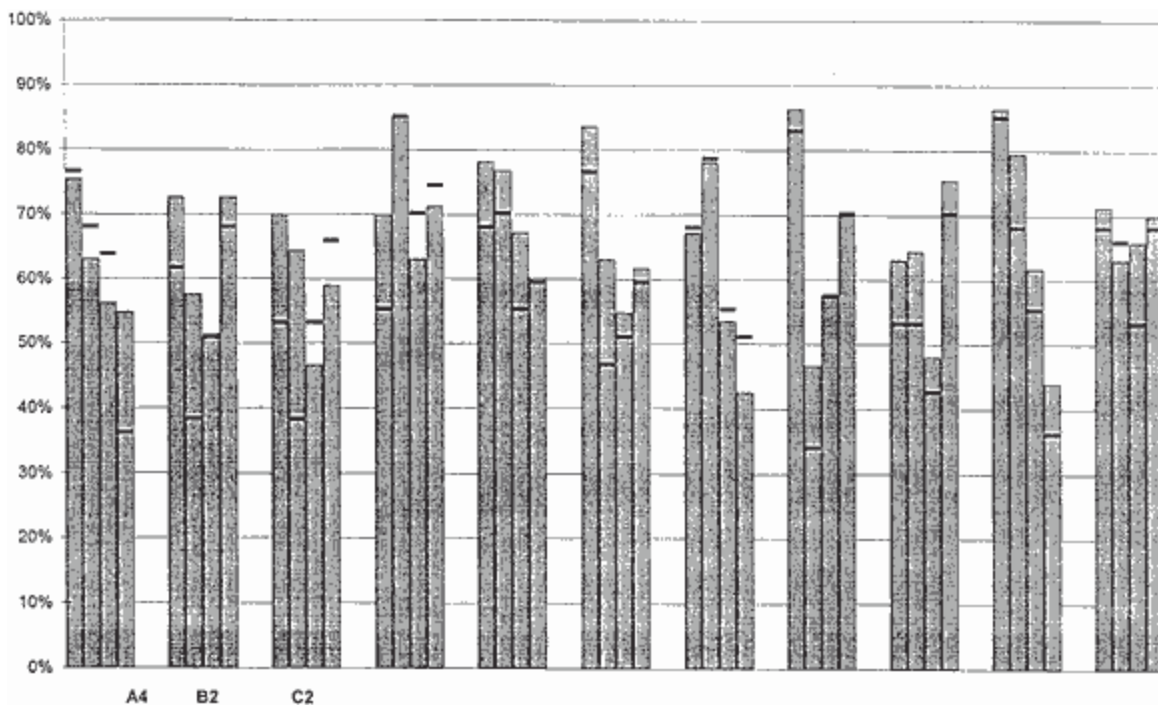
It appears that Ontario Works learners have difficulties with a number of specific selfmanagement/self-direction skills. The greatest variation was noted for the following three skills where the performance of Ontario Works learners was well below that of other LBS learners.

- I participate actively in a variety of tasks and activities (A 4)
- I show initiative by contributing ideas and suggestions (B 2)
- I can use a variety of approaches to deal with problems I encounter at the college and in my program (C 2)

An interesting coincidence was noted here. In the Introduction of Retention Strategy # 3 (**Appendix 3**), the researchers had used the same three skills sets to explain the possible connection between self-management skills and the more serious psychosocial barriers they might represent for Ontario Works learners.

- self-confidence skills (lack of skills might account for poor participation due to anxiety and stress)
- problem-solving skills (lack of skills might account for feelings of frustration, anger)
- personal advocacy and self-motivation skills (lack of skills might indicate a weak internal locus of control)

This choice of examples was influenced by Phase 1 research which focused on retention and the Ontario Works client. Several practitioners had commented on the lack of motivation of Ontario Works clients, "There is a significant difference in motivation. Ontario Works students are less motivated than before. School is not voluntary, " ([3] p. 7) The researchers also chose to focus on locus of control as the key variable for determining why learners stay in or drop out of school. They felt there was a particularly strong relationship between locus of control and the three skills where performance by Ontario Works learners was particularly low. A weak internal locus of control is associated with poor self-confidence and lack of motivation. It might also affect the desire or ability of a learner to problem-solve effectively.

The findings, then, closely matched the overall profile of the Ontario Works client developed in Phase 1 — a client with multiple barriers at risk of dropping out. The at-risk learner, therefore, must be identified early on in the LBS program and be given personal support and help with confidence-building and problem-solving.

Nineteen percent (19%) of all learners found some of the performance indicators confusing or hard to respond to. Since few learners provided examples and few entered their LBS communication level on the evaluation forms, it was not possible to determine the specific source of this problem. In at least one college the practitioner read the Quick Screen to all learners who participated in the field test. Considering the number of learners (23%) who identified themselves as having a learning disability (Strategy # 1), other colleges might want to follow this lead.

Comments

- (Thinking Skills) *I didn't know how to answer that one.*
- (Problem-solving skills) *found that some of the questions were not explained well so I may have guessed at their meaning*
- *hard to understand the way most of the questions are asked*

Learners suggested other skills sets to add such as anger-management, stress-management and developing patience.

The average time it took for learners to complete the Quick Screen was 8.7 minutes. Without the evaluation form which was needed for field test purposes, this time would be reduced even further.

Suggestions for Improving the Quick Screen
• make it shorter 7
• make it longer 4
• make it less repetitive 6

It is not surprising that some learners found the tool repetitive. The researchers intentionally chose multiple statements (4 performance indicators for each skills set) to ensure internal validity. Performance indicators were selected and/or developed to determine finer detail within

a particular set of skills. Rather than reduce the number of performance indicators, the tool was reviewed further to identify any unnecessary repetitive indicators. Two were found to be repetitive and were revised.

Summary of Practitioner Feedback

Please note: Although seven practitioners actually participated in this field test, the feedback is based on five evaluation forms only.

How helpful was the background information?

• not very helpful 0
• fairly helpful 0
• helpful 2
• very helpful 3

Comments

• *very helpful and interesting. This material gave the project some depth.*

Where did you use the Quick Screen?

• in initial assessment/intake 3
• in ongoing assessment 4

How did you use the Quick Screen with your learners?

• in a one-to-one situation 3
• in a small group situation 3

How many of the self-assessment results were you able to compare with your own perceptions of learners' skills?

• all 1
• one 1
• some 1

All three felt the Quick Screen results compared well or fairly well with their own perceptions of learners' skills.

Comments

• The Quick Screen must be combined with observation over time.

How would you describe learners' overall reaction to the Quick Screen?

• not very positive 0
• somewhat positive 3
• positive 3
• very positive 0

Comments

- *Reaction varied. I suggested that learners explore the Internet sites you included in the kit. Participants responded very positively to that activity.*
- *have started using the Queendom self-help website — the learners find this useful and informative*

In what ways could the Quick Screen be improved?

- be more specific 0
- include a range of choices 2
- be written in clearer language 0
- take less time to use 1

Comments

- *Learners could probably answer the questionnaire more realistically after 2 to 3 weeks in the program. If they have been out of school for a long period of time, they might find the statements difficult to respond to.*
- *We will be using this document at orientation in the future — it would be a good tool to review with the learners after they have been in the program 3 to 5 weeks.*

Concerns

- *Some learners were reluctant to put their names on the forms.*
- *Some learners felt the questions were too personal.*

Do you feel that other skills sets and performance indicators should be added?

- yes 3
- no 0

Comments

- *Perhaps note taking and note organization skills could be added.*
- *how to deal with family and personal situations which may pose obstacles to success in LaS programs*
- *I don't have suggestions at the moment but felt it could be more comprehensive.*

Is your overall awareness of the self-management and psychosocial needs of the hard-to-serve client better now than it was before participating in this field test?

- yes 2
- no 2

Comments

- I think the Quick Screen is useful, however, I have previously worked many of these categories with participants.
- The performance indicators provide informative guidelines for self-evaluation by the students which help assess their perception of progress and difficulties.
- The Quick Screen helps learners pinpoint specific areas of weakness.

Do you feel that helping learners explore their self-management needs early on in the LBS program, and helping them develop appropriate self-management learning has potential as a useful retention strategy?

- yes 4
- yes and no 1

Comments

- I think this type of assessment in a larger vein will help-more time, larger areas to discuss
- Yes and no because it takes some time and relationship-building to broach these topics with individuals.

Do you plan to use the Quick Screen (or a modified version of it) for initial or ongoing assessment?

- yes 4
- no 0
- maybe 1

Comments

- Yes with some people; I haven't decided to use it routinely.

Summary Highlights

Strategy # 3 provided an opportunity to introduce the recently released Self-Management/Self-Direction Features to college practitioners and learners. Seven practitioner/counsellors used the Quick Screen with over 130 learners. Learners were unanimous with respect to how important they considered the self-management skills.

The strongest skills overall were in the area of self-assessment/self-reflection; the weakest, in the area of problem-solving. The difference between them however was not significant. More pronounced differences were noted when individual performance indicators within the skills sets were compared. In analyzing the discrepancies, the researchers reviewed the indicators themselves. They found three to be problematic and consequently revised them. Two more were revised because they appeared to be repetitive. See **Appendix 3A** for the revised Quick Screen.

Although a number of suggestions were made to improve the tool by both learners and practitioners, there was not sufficient specificity within or consistency among comments to warrant further changes. Instead, practitioners are encouraged to use the tool and revise it, e.g., incorporate a range of choices (sometimes, often, never) instead of a single option response. Also, if practitioners are not in a position to read the Quick Screen aloud to learners, they might consider simplifying the language.

Three practitioners who used the tool as part of ongoing assessment felt learners' responses compared well or fairly well with their own perceptions of learners' skills. This observation is very encouraging.

Differences were noted in the performance of Ontario Works learners compared to other learners. Ontario Works learners tended to be somewhat weaker in several areas of self-management (16 out of 44) while considerably weaker in specific skills related to problem solving, self-confidence and motivation. Although the sample was not representative, and other variables presumably influenced the outcome, these findings support observations made by LBS college practitioners and Ontario Works caseworkers in Phase I. Together they lead to a strong recommendation that LBS college programs use the Quick Screen (or similar instrument) early on in the program to determine the self-management needs of Ontario Works learners. For learners shown to be at risk, it is further recommended that programs provide additional support and skills building in key self-management areas.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary purpose of all three retention strategies was to identify Ontario Works learners at risk and present LBS college programs with different approaches for including and fully integrating them into the program. All three strategies show strong potential for improving the retention rates for all learners at risk. They help empower them and prepare them to take more responsibility for their education. Most importantly they show, as one practitioner pointed out, "that teachers care."

The large number of learners who participated in the strategies overwhelmingly supported the purpose and value of the strategies. Retention is in everybody's best interest, and colleges will need to continue their current efforts and develop new, innovative strategies to help Ontario Works learners and other learners at risk stay in the program long enough to complete their goals.

This project showed that efforts could be as simple as connecting to learners early on in the program and showing interest in them. The three strategies were designed to be simple and short which seems to have appealed to learners and practitioners alike. To be of maximum benefit to learners, however, practitioners will need to use them, improve them and adapt them to their own particular setting.

It is therefore recommended that LBS colleges (managers/counsellors/practitioners):

1. Try the revised strategies and continue to adjust them.
2. Review their orientation process. Mandatory orientation for first-time learners has been proven to contribute to learner success. Practitioners should try to include one or more of the three retention strategies in orientation.
3. Use the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen in orientation or fairly early on in the program to increase learners' awareness. "The variety of special services that community colleges provide for students with special needs, makes community colleges an excellent choice for students from underrepresented groups and ones with (learning) disabilities." ([4], p. 12)
4. Borrow a copy of the manual, Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults With Learning Disabilities to view a more detailed learning disabilities assessment tool and discover learning strategies to use with learning disabled students.
5. Use focus groups to give learners a voice, increase practitioners' awareness of their situations and gather specific information on various topics of concern to learners. According to one practitioner who participated in the field test, "We have been using focus groups with new learners for some time. This is a positive reinforcement for retention. It is an informal instrument for us."
6. Use the Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen to determine learners' needs. Review the overall LBS program to see where and how the self-management skills are covered either formally and informally.
7. Conduct comparative analysis using the Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen with incoming and exiting learners to determine gain in self-management skills.
8. Learn more about retention issues by trying the retention quiz or accessing the other two excellent web sites listed on the following page.
9. Try other retention strategies if these three are not helpful. Review the list of strategies that other colleges have tried as outlined in the Phase 1 report, or visit the web site on the following page which presents sixty-three ideas for college faculty to use in dealing with retention/attrition.

References and Resources

[1] Quigley, Allan B. 1998. *The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation.*
http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/fob/1998/quigley.htm

[2] Bainbridge, Terry. 2001. *Student Success Report - a Draft.* Literacy and Basic Skills College Sector Committee.

[3] Jonik, Mary and Goforth, Dee. 2000. *What Works Phase 1: Recruitment and Retention of Ontario Works Clients.* Literacy and Basic Skills College Sector Committee.

[4] *Community Colleges Programs and Services for Special Populations and Underrepresented Groups Fiscal Year 1996.* 1997. Illinois Community College Board.

Retention: Program Administrators' Manual. 1998. Ohio Department of Education Adult Basic and Literacy Education.
http://literacy.kent.edu/adminmanual/145-154.html

Sixty-three ideas are presented for college faculty use in dealing with retention/attrition. The following ideas are a product of a faculty seminar at Jefferson Community College, Kentucky.
www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/
guidebk/teachtip/studretn.htm

Try the retention quiz at the following web site:
www.aceofflorida.org/inservice/region3/retention/pretesta.htm

Appendix 1

Strategy # 1: Learning Alert

Learning Alert: A Learning Disabilities Quick Screen

Background

According to practitioner and learner feedback in Phase 1 of What Works, learning disabilities was a frequently mentioned barrier that affected learners' self esteem, their ability to progress and their overall participation in LBS college programs. The researchers felt that an information package with concrete, practical assessment and teaching ideas would help practitioners assist learners with learning disabilities. The preliminary report (page 21) outlines why the researchers chose to re-evaluate this strategy. First of all, Ontario Works does not require clients with learning disabilities to attend school, and secondly, a number of learning disabilities initiatives had already been started in the province. The researchers were concerned about duplicating efforts. One of the researchers, however, had an opportunity to attend a three-day training event in September which was part of the Learning Disabilities Practitioner Training Project. Because of information gathered at this training session and because their own research showed that early detection of learning barriers is critical to retention, the researchers decided to revisit learning disabilities. The result was the development of a retention strategy that would provide practitioners with a simple selfscreening tool.

Although each college has a special needs department, which assists students with learning disabilities, it is often difficult for practitioners to know when or how to discuss the issue of learning disabilities assessment with them. It may be equally difficult for the learner to selfidentify and seek help. Screening instruments are sometimes used by program staff with learners to decide whether they should be referred for a complete diagnostic assessment. A screening tool is different from diagnostic testing. Screening results alone cannot determine the presence of learning disabilities. [1]

Screening instruments, including those for learning disabilities, have most or all of the following characteristics. They are:

- Helpful in determining the need for future testing
- Quick to administer, score, and interpret
- Appropriate for large numbers of persons, and can sometimes be administered in group settings
- Narrow in purpose
- Helpful in determining the need for future testing
- Inexpensive
- Usable without extensive training of staff [1]

There are numerous screening and assessment tools for adults with learning disabilities. After an extensive review of various tools and interviews with experts in the field, the researchers decided to draw from information found in *Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learming Disabilities* developed by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada. This manual not only helps identify different kinds of learning disabilities, but also provides strategies for teaching those who are at risk. [2] The Screening Questionnaire and the At-Risk Summary Checklist in Destination Literacy are excellent resources for determining the possible presence of learning disabilities. It takes approximat~ly one hour to administer the Screening Questionnaire alone however. The researchers realized that practitioners in LBS college programs would likely not have time to use the full questionnaire with every learner suspected of having a learning disability. A much more compact process was therefore developed for piloting purposes in *What Works Phase 2*. Six key questions that were felt to be the strongest determinants of the presence of learning disabilities were drawn from the Screening Questionnaire in Destination Literacy and used to develop the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen.

See **Appendix 1A** for the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen.

The key questions are:

1. What grades, if any, did you repeat?
2. Did you receive any special help in school?
3. Did you have any special testing for your school problems? (This refers to psychoeducational assessment, not to regular class tests and examinations.)
4. Were you ever told that you had a learning disability or an attention-deficit disorder?
5. Does anyone in your family have a problem with learning?
6. Have you ever used any assistive devices to help you learn? (e.g., books on tape, voice activated computer)

Since the primary focus of this project is on the first three weeks of school, learners who start a program could be given the Quick Screen during the orientation or intake process. It is very important however, that the information gathered through the screening tool go to the person who will be working directly with the learner. It is also important to point out that this is a highly sensitive area for many learners and they might not be ready to disclose at this point. Completing the Quick Screen will, however, raise learners' awareness about learning disabilities and the availability of help. As mentioned above, Destination Literacy has an excellent At-Risk Summary Checklist that could be used in conjunction with the Quick Screen.

The At-Risk Summary Checklist tool is as follows:

("No" responses will eliminate these factors.)

- ❑ VISION problems may have interfered with learning.
- ❑ HEARING problems may have interfered with learning.
- ❑ HEALTH problems or PHYSICAL DISABILITIES may have interfered with learning.
- ❑ Irregular attendance may have interfered with learning.
- ❑ Lack of motivation and poor application to studies may have interfered with learning, especially in early grades.

("Yes" responses to the following statements may suggest a learning disability.)

- ❑ Student seems competent in a number of areas and seems to be of at least average intellectual ability.
- ❑ There is variability in abilities with many strengths, and some or many problem areas.
- ❑ There is difficulty in learning (listening/speaking/reading/writing/math/Organization/problemsolving/ memory/concentration/basic life-skills).
- ❑ There is a history of difficulties in learning from a young age.
- ❑ There is a previous diagnosis of learning disabilities.
- ❑ There is a history of special help in school.
- ❑ There is a discrepancy between the highest grade completed and the number of years to complete studies, despite regular attendance at school.
- ❑ There is a family history of specific learning disabilities.
- ❑ For ESI adults, there is a difficulty learning English literacy skills as well as literacy skills in native language; or difficulties learning literacy skills in native language.

Guidelines for Interpreting Results of the Learning Disabilities Quick Screen

Once the learner has completed the learning Disabilities Quick Screen, the practitioner should have enough information to determine whether further assessment is required. This process involves two-steps. First of all, the practitioner needs to be able to distinguish those learners who may have a learning problem from those who may not. For example, if a learner

- has not missed grades
- has done well in most or all subject areas
- has never been told s/he has a learning disability (by a professional)
- has not required special assistance 1
- has no family history with specific learning disabilities or problems

It is **likely** s/he has no learning problem.

If a learning problem **appears** to be present, however, the next challenge is to determine whether it is a result of low intellectual ability or of a learning disability. Here, the practitioner will need to analyze the learner's responses and comments very carefully.

For example, If a learner

- missed grades because s/he had trouble keeping up (for reasons other than illness, moving, etc.)
- had difficulty in several different subject areas
- has a history of learning problems in the family

it is **possible** that s/he has low intellectual ability.

A learner with low ability will often report a wide variety of problems in terms of past schooling, which may be seen in some of the learner's comments on the Quick Screen. If the learner has not fully completed all questions on the Quick Screen or provided enough information for the practitioner to decide on the nature of the learning problem, then further exploration with the learner is definitely recommended. Likewise, if the practitioner feels there is sufficient information that suggests the student may have a learning disability, s/he can use the At-Risk Summary Checklist or the full version included in Destination Literacy to explore further or confirm observations. Each college also has a special needs department which could conduct an in-depth learning disabilities assessment <u>if the learner wishes to proceed with further assessment</u>.

References

[1] The Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council
This is an excellent site, which looks at many different aspects of learning disabilities including screening and formal assessment.
www.seakingwdc.org

[2] Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities. 1999.
Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
www.ldac-taac.ca/english/indepth/adults/destinat.htm

Resources

The Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council
This is an excellent site, which looks at many different aspects of learning disabilities including screening and formal assessment.
www.seakingwdc.org

Washington State Learning Needs Screening Tool
This is a thirteen question Learning Needs Screening Tool developed by The Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council. This is a very quick and effective method of screening individuals for potential learning disabilities.
http://www.seakingwdc.org/ld/WaScreenTool.htm

Special Needs Assessment Procedures. Hatt, Pat.
This manual speaks directly to the literacy assessor who wishes to adapt his or her assessment process to give equal access to people with disabilities. It can also help identify goals for working with these learners.
http://gear.torque.net/~bpd/dev/snap/

Hatt, Pat and Nichols, Eva. *Target Literacy: A Learning Disability Resource Guide*. Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario.
This resource contains a screening process, which was developed specifically for adults. This screening process will help practitioners understand the learner's strengths and weaknesses.

Johnston, Janet. 1996. *Adults with Learning Disabilities: The Road to Success*.
This publication deals with identifying learning disabilities and contains a checklist of adult learning disabilities characteristics.

Techniques: Working With Adults With Learning Disabilities.
This resource offers a list of teaching techniques that have been suggested as effective with adults who have suspected or diagnosed learning disabilities.
http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/ld/archive/techniqu.htm

Marz, David. *Adult Learning Disorders*.
This article lists categories of L.D. along with symptoms and ideas for helping adults with learning disabilities. It also includes several other resources.
http://www.apeo.org/schools/adultld.htm (*URL no longer valid)

Addvantages.
This resource provides an overview of the assessment process for adults with learning disabilities. It includes a comprehensive source of information about attention deficit disorder and learning disabilities.
http://www.surrealtech.com/addvantages/ld17.html (*URL no longer valid)

Smith, Cathy. 1991. *For You: Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.
This book is designed to help adults gain a better understanding of learning disabilities and, through increased self-awareness, develop strategies for more effective communication in all aspects of daily life.

Learning Disabilities Associations

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario
365 Bloor St.E,
Suite 1004, Box 39
Toronto, ON M4W 3L4

Telephone: 416/929-4311
Fax: 416/929-3905

Email: resource@ldao.on.ca
Website: http://www.ldao.on.ca

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
(National Office)
323 Chapel St.
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2

Telephone: (613) 238-5721
Fax: (613) 235-5391

Email: information@ldac-taac.ca
Website: http://www.ldac-taac.ca

Appendix 1A

Learning Disabilities Quick Screen

Learning Disabilities Quick Screen

Student Number:_____   Date:_____

Introduction:
Adults with learning disabilities can have average, above average or exceptional intelligence. They may be highly gifted in certain areas, but may have severe learning problems in other areas. This unique problem might interfere with their ability to make timely progress and complete their learning goals. It is important for you and the program to know up front about any learning difficulties you may have.

Each college has a special needs department which can assist you with identifying specific learning difficulties and strategies for coping with them. It is often difficult for teachers to know when to recommend a more thorough assessment to learners, or for learners to request it themselves. The Quick Screen on the following pages may help determine whether you will need more testing later on in the program. **By itself, however, it cannot show that you have a learning disability**.

Instructions: Read all the following questions, and reflect carefully on them. Then check off the boxes that specifically apply to you. Generally when you answer "yes," you will be asked to provide more information. Space has been provided for comments you may wish to add.

When you have finished, turn all three pages in to your teacher.

Quick Screen

1. Can you remember repeating any grades in school?

   ❑ no
   ❑ yes

   What grades? _____
   Why? (check as many as apply)
   ❑ I was sick a lot
   ❑ I moved a lot
   ❑ I had trouble keeping up with the work
   ❑ other
   Please describe other reasons:

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Check <u>one</u> of the following boxes:
   ❑ I did well in most or all of my subject areas
   ❑ I was really strong in some subject areas and really weak in others
   ❑ I had trouble with most or all of my subject areas

3. Do you remember getting any special help in school?

   ❑ no
   ❑ yes

   What kind of help did you receive? (check as many as apply)
   ❑ working in a small group
   ❑ working in a one-to-one situation
   ❑ working with a special-ed teacher
   ❑ getting extra help after school
   ❑ other
   Please describe other kinds of help you received:

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. If you did have any problems learning, did you have any special testing?

❑ no
❑ yes

Describe the kind of testing you received (e.g., by a school psychologist, doctor, teacher)

_____

_____

3. Were you ever told that you had a learning disability or an attention deficit disorder?

❑ no
❑ yes

Who told you?

_____

6. Does anyone in your family have a problem with learning?

❑ no
❑ yes

Please describe the problem.

_____

_____

7. Has anyone in your family been diagnosed with a learning disability?

❑ no
❑ yes

Comments:

_____

_____

8. Have you ever used any assistive devices to help you learn? (e.g., books on tape, voice activated computer, tape recorder for lectures)

❑ no
❑ yes

List some of these devices below.

_____

_____

Appendix 2

Strategy #2: Learners Helping Learners

Retention Strategy #2

Learners Helping Learners: Setting Up Focus Groups for Learners

Background

Phase 1 of *What Works* clearly indicated that Ontario Works sponsored learners in the LBS college setting wanted and needed more support from other learners. Retention Strategy # 2, Setting Up Focus Groups for Learners, was developed to respond to this need. The researchers decided that background information on the value and purpose of focus groups, and an accompanying checklist for setting up and facilitating focus groups was the best means to accomplish this. Both pieces are designed to help practitioners set up a series of focus groups that would provide a forum for learners to raise issues, share concerns and identify needs. Not only would the focus groups provide a support system for learners, they would provide practitioners with valuable feedback for assisting learners in various aspects of program planning. More importantly, it was hoped that the focus groups would act as a starting point for establishing learner support groups initiated and facilitated by learners themselves. Because of the time frame, however, setting up and studying the effectiveness themselves. Because of the time frame, however, setting up and studying the effectiveness of support groups was beyond the scope of this project.

A specific goal for the focus groups was to discover from the learners what would help them stay in school. As practitioners it is important to develop awareness of the obstacles which relate to issues of retention. One of the best methods for doing this is to ask learners directly.

Purpose and Value of Focus Groups

Insightful communication and learning processes occur in focus groups which activate participant interaction. (Catterall and Maclaran) [1] The value of focus groups is not only that people can react to each other's comments, but by so doing, they stimulate each other. Stimulation is generated by the excitement, group support, new ideas and other features of the interaction. Exposure to views and experiences of others, for example, stimulates learners to discuss topics in greater depth. As a result of stimulation, more information is gathered from the group than from any amount of questioning of individual learners. Market Navigation, Inc. has created the following list of items which stimulate others in a focus group:

- reacting to each other's comments
- drawing each other out
- asking each other questions you didn't think to ask
- building on each other's ideas
- sparking new ideas
- jogging each other's memories
- modifying each other's comments

- filling in incompletions and gaps in knowledge
- nudging each other out of ruts and habitual thinking
- taking opposing positions
- persuading each other
- changing their opinions [2]

Furthermore, as learners have stated repeatedly, they get into more detail with other people who are in the "same shoes," i.e., people who understand them.

Features of Effective Focus Groups

A clear statement of purpose is the most important step in focus group planning as it sets the direction for all that follows. Questions posed during the group should be clear and kept to a minimum with an average of about 5 or 6. Flexibility is also critical as the facilitator may deem it necessary to follow the psychological order of the group rather than the logical order of the process. [2] The actual focus group could run anywhere from 40 minutes to 2 hours. Effective groups have between 6 to 10 participants with a maximum of 15 and as few as 4.

ChoosingTopics

The purpose of the What Works Project was to improve the participation and commitment of Ontario Works clients in LBS college programs. Retention, however, is an issue for all LBS learners. Implementing a series of focus groups can give learners an opportunity to provide insight on challenges and obstacles they experience on a daily basis. Learners' own words are more effective in sensitizing practitioners than any on paper. Focus groups can also provide neutral territory for learners to problem-solve, suggest program changes or identify means of ongoing support. Suggested topics for focus groups for field testing centred on issues relating to retention.

Examples included:

- How Can I Connect Better to My Teachers?
- Coping With Ontario Works
- How to Get Along with Ontario Works Case Workers
- Supports for Single Parents - What Do I Need?

A critical topic for discussion could also be how to help learners set up ongoing support groups. An excellent manual called Setting Up A Self-Help Group-A Guide for Adult Learners was developed by the PEI Literacy Alliance. The manual, which is written in plain language, shows a step-by-step method of creating self-help group for learners. The manual can be found at the following address http://www.nald.ca/CLR/selfhelp/cover.htm. [3]

Facilitation Skills Needed

Facilitators should be encouraged to work in pairs. The advantage is that the recorder can focus on observing and taking notes, allowing the facilitator to concentrate on asking questions, facilitating the group interaction, following up on ideas, and making smooth transitions from issue to issue. Consistency across focus groups is critical, so careful preparation with regard to role and responsibilities is required. [4]

Facilitators will need to possess good interpersonal skills and listening skills, and be nonjudgmental and adaptable. These qualities will promote the participants' trust in the facilitator and increase the likelihood of open, interactive dialogue. [4]

The role of facilitator is to provide clear explanations of the purpose of the group, help people feel at ease, and facilitate interaction between group members. An understanding of group dynamics is essential for focus group facilitators. Groups go through the following sequence of stages: forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning. An understaraJing of these stages can help the facilitator move participants through the initial difficult stages of the discussion. [5]

During the meeting facilitators will need to promote debate, perhaps by asking open questions. At times, facilitators may need to probe for details, or move things forward when the conversation is off track. The sessions should stay focused so facilitators may have to steer the conversation back on course. Facilitators also have to ensure full participation and that no single individual dominates the discussion. Facilitators are cautioned not to show favoritism toward particular participants. It is critical not to influence the discussion by giving personal opinions. [5]

Planning for Subsequent Discussions

Affinity charting is a simple way for a group to cluster data and to generate ideas for further discussion. It is used to organize facts, opinions, and ideas into natural topics or groupings. Each member of the group is issued with a stack of post-it notes and a pen. A "goal statement" is defined and everyone is asked to write down any ideas they have on the subject, one idea to each post-it. A limited time is given (e.g., 5 minutes). The post-its are then stuck onto a flipchart and an attempt is made by the group to invent headings under which to cluster the ideas. The post-its are moved to the appropriate group headings. [6]

A Checklist of What to Watch for in Focus Groups

This checklist was developed by Market Navigation, Inc., Client Guide to the Focus Group
http://www.mnav.com/cligd.htm

❑ Verbalizations - what participants are saying
❑ Meanings - what they actually mean
❑ Language
❑ Vocabulary, jargon
❑ Level
❑ Empathic Quotes
❑ Classes, concepts, categories
❑ Degree of formality
❑ Non-verbals
❑ Omissions, what people are not saying
❑ Abstractions
❑ New concepts
❑ Examples, stories
❑ Contradictions - e.g. between thoughts and feelings, statements and examples
❑ Explanations - yours and theirs
❑ Hypotheses
❑ Implications
❑ Generalizations and Principles
❑ Values
❑ Fundamental beliefs
❑ Relationships - interpersonal, conceptual, logical, emotional, cause and effect,
❑ Emotional reactions, particularly:
❑ Enthusiasm, joy, excitement, perking up of interest
❑ Low energy
❑ Anger
❑ Fear
❑ Curiosity
❑ Changes in emotional tone
❑ Patterns - intellectual, emotional, behavioral, cause and effect, between roles
❑ Roles and what people do with them
❑ Degree of consensus, agreement
❑ Different points of view
❑ Influence patterns
❑ Opinion Shifts
❑ Persuasion flow

Practitioners' Observation Log for Focus Groups

Names of facilitators _____ and _____ .

College Site _____

Focus Group_____

Topic of discussion _____

Issues and concerns raised _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Group dynamics _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Areas of agreement or resolution _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Areas of enhanced understanding _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Other observations _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix 3

Strategy #3: Screening for Success

Retention Strategy #2

Screening for Success:
A Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen

Background

The outcome for Self-Management/Self-Direction is _Become a Self-Directed Learner_. For learners with seemingly insurmountable barriers to participation, this outcome may be all but impossible to achieve. Often the only perceived option is to drop out of school. The issues surrounding retention are varied and complex. Involved are a considerable number of factors that may contribute to student success in education, training or employment; likewise, these factors may contribute to student attrition. Roussy ([1] p. 11) in her report, _How Do You Spell Success_, has developed a highly useful model in chart form based on extensive research in the areas of attrition, retention, persistence and goal achievement. With permission the chart is presented below:

Demographic Variables	Situational Variables	Psychosocial Variables	Program Variables
• Age • Gender • Race/ethnicity • Marital status • Number of dependents • Employment status • Economic status • Prior educational attainment • Level of intelligence/ability • Academic ability • Diagnosis of LD • Entry level	• time to complete goals • availability of support • financial resources • family situation • marital status • addictions • employment • current health • taking medication • relocation • child care • transportation • regular attendance • experience of stress or crisis in life change	• negative school experiences • concrete goals • realistic goals • clarity of goals • motivation to learn • determination to learn • commitment to learning • level of self-esteem • academic/social integration • locus of control • perception of progress • need for support • interest in learning materials, approaches • fear of failure • voluntary participation • resistance to learning • coping strategies • time management	• course relevancy • availability of counseling • ability to show that progress has occurred • quality of instruction • number of tutors • class size • class location • class scheduling • quality of learning materials • availability of support

The researchers chose to focus on one psychosocial variable in particular, locus of control, as the best model to explore retention issues for the at-risk client. They felt that most LBS college programs would be familiar with the concept of locus of control and might already be using locus of control tests/surveys as part of their initial assessment or orientation.

Locus of control, simply put, refers to how individuals see the cause of life events. Those with an internal locus of control generally see themselves as responsible for things that happen, while those with an external locus of control generally attribute their circumstances to situations beyond their control. Psychosocial factors which describe how learners feel and think are seldom cited by learners as reasons for leaving programs. Instead, learners generally cite situational reasons such as day care difficulties and difficulty with transportation or finances as reasons for dropping out.

There is no question that real-life situations often become insurmountable obstacles to learning, especially for hard-to-serve clients who may have several problems to deal with at the same time. Research has shown, however, that many learners coping with similar and often overwhelming barriers such as poor health, family demands and disabilities, do, in fact, manage to overcome obstacles and succeed in achieving their educational goals. Why do some learners succeed where other fail? Strong internal locus of control is associated with academic success. Taylor and Boss investigated the relationship between locus of control and course completion in an adult basic education program. [2] Their most significant finding was that learners who completed the program tended to believe in the outcomes of their own actions. Generally they were able to overcome problems such as those described above and achieve their goal of program completion. Those who felt controlled by external forces such as fate or luck did not fare so well. The researchers felt that developing a tool to help learners assess their strengths and weaknesses in the areas of self-management and self-direction early on the program might also help identify those at risk of dropping out.

The revised Self-Management/Self-Direction features were released by the Ontario Literacy Coalition in the fall of 2000. The ten features and various examples of performance indicators were designed to support learning and help learners work toward their learning goals. They are presented in a very positive and impersonal way intended to engage, rather than intimidate the learner. Programs and learners were invited to add additional features that are relevant to their agencies. The researchers used the features to develop a Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen. As a result of the initial pilot of the Quick Screen (with 32 LBS college learners) one extra feature, adaptability, was added and the term "feature" changed to "skills set," a term learners were more familiar with.

See **Appendix 3A** for the Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen.

The researchers felt that all eleven features or skills sets were relevant to at-risk learners and might serve to further identify related psychosocial barriers. Some of these barriers are presented below in brackets:

- self-confidence skills (lack of skills might account for poor participation due to anxiety and stress)
- problem-solving skills (lack of skills might account for feelings of frustration, anger)
- personal advocacy and self-motivation skills (lack of skills might indicate a weak internal locus of control)
- self-assessment/self-reflection skills (lack of skills might be related to inappropriate behaviours)
- working with others skills (lack of skills might indicate that learners will have difficulty connecting to teachers and other students)

Discovering students' barriers to learning and participation, of course, implies a careful and sensitive examination of their existing skills, knowledge and behaviours. The primary purpose of the Quick Screen is to identify learners at risk. Although this examination or assessment should be

conducted early on in the intake/orientation process, it may not always be possible. The Quick Screen, therefore, can also be used to explore in a non-intimidating way why learners may be having difficulty making progress in their programs.

The *Level Descriptions Manual*, provides other ideas for using the features, e.g., to assist with the development of long term-goals. ([3] p. 96)

Guidelines for Interpreting Results of the Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen

Practitioners should look for major discrepancies among skills sets. Learners may show real strengths (where they have checked 3 or 4 performance indicators) in particular skills sets and real weaknesses (where they have checked 0 or 1) in others. If a learner has checked 2 indicators within a skills set, the practitioner may wish to discuss this skills area further with the learner. It is very important to find out how the learner feels about the results of the assessment. Does the learner perceive the difficulty as a barrier to learning? Is s/he motivated to improve self-management skills?

Once overall self-management needs are identified, the practitioner can begin to explore them more carefully with the learner. Together they can identify the critical ones and develop appropriate learning and demonstration activities such as using self-esteem or anxiety self-tests to promote self-reflection (see Resources p. 4), or using focus groups for purposes of sharing concerns, raising issues and solving problems.

In using the Quick Screen to identify barriers to participation, either as part of intake or during ongoing programming, practitioners and counsellors may discover some serious psychosocial needs that can't be met through general program supports. In these cases, referrals to appropriate outside agencies must be considered.

References

[1] Roussy, Yvonne. 2000. *The Qualitative Tracking Project: How Do you Spell Success?* The Literacy Group of Waterloo Region.

[2] Taylor, Maurice, and Boss, Marvin. *Locus of Control and Course Completion in Adult Basic Education.* http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/report2/rep12-01.htm

[3] *The Levels Description Manual.* 2000. The Ontario Literacy Coalition.

Resources

Below are a number of self-tests/surveys that learners might find useful to begin exploring their skills, attitudes and feelings. The value of most of these self-tests is that they can be scored on line.

You can find the self-tests/surveys at the following web site:
http://www.queendom.com/selfhelp/index.html

Time Management
• Time Management Test

Stress
- Coping Skills Test
- Stress Sources
- Distress Symptoms
- Stress Balancing Strategies
- Life Stress Test
- Stress Toughness Questionnaire
- Family Stress Test

Anxiety
- Anxiety Inventory
- Social Anxiety Inventory
- Online Screening for Anxiety

Anger and Conflict
- What is Your Conflict Management Style?
- Conflict Style Profile
- Analyse Your Conflict Management Style
- Test your temper
- WGBC Anger Inventory Test
- NOVACO Anger Scale
- Anger Quotient Test
- Anger: what is it? and why - Plus self test
- Measure Your Anger

Self-Esteem
. Self-Esteem Inventory

Appendix 3A

Self-Management/Self-Direction Quick Screen

Self-Management/Self-Direction Skills Quick Screen

Student Number: _____   Date: _____

The LBS Program is not just about learning to read, write and do math better. It's also about becoming a self-directed learner. There are many other skills that you can develop that will help you achieve your goals. These skills are called self-management/self-direction skills and they surround and support learning. The eleven skills sets and related performance indicators in the chart below are designed to help you determine specific skills you may need to develop. This quick screen represents a starting point in helping you explore those selfmanagement/self-direction skills you will need to participate fully in the program and achieve success.

Instructions: Read all the information in the following chart, and reflect carefully on it. Then check off the boxes that specifically apply to you. You may check off as many as you want. Some of the questions are about your general skills and some are about your skills as a learner in the LBS program. When you have finished, turn all three pages in to your teacher.

Skills Set A	Performance Indicators
Self-Confidence Building Skills	❑ **I am usually ready to try new learning challenges and assignments** ❑ **I show enthusiasm for learning new things** ❑ **I am comfortable seeking information and direction from teachers or other students** ❑ **I participate actively in a variety of tasks and activities**
Skills Set B	**Performance Indicators**
Personal Advocacy and Self-Motivation Skills	❑ **I am able to ask for and get what I need** ❑ **I show initiative by contributing ideas and suggestions** ❑ **I demonstrate interest in different aspects of the orientation or ongoing program** ❑ **I take an active role in shaping my own learning**

Skills Set C	Performance Indicators
Problem-Solving Skills	❑ I am able to identify problems and generate ideas about possible solutions ❑ I can use a variety of approaches to deal with problems I encounter at the college and in my program ❑ I can develop and use techniques for breaking problems down into manageable parts ❑ I can name several examples in the past where I have solved problems successfully
Skills Set D	**Performance Indicators**
Self- Assessment and Self- Reflection Skills	❑ I am aware of obstacles that may make it difficult for me to fully participate in the LBS program ❑ I know when I have done well (or not done well) on an assignment even before it gets marked ❑ I can use constructive criticism of my own work to help me move on ❑ I have a clear understanding of my own learning strengths and weaknesses
Skills Set E	**Performance Indicators**
Working with Others	❑ I can participate appropriately in the program (e.g., in class, on committees, etc.) ❑ I work well as part of a team ❑ I help out others when they need help ❑ I can successfully deal with conflict within a group
Skills Set F	**Performance Indicators**
Goal Setting Skills	❑ I recognize the importance of setting goals ❑ I am able to set long-term goals based on an understanding of my own skills, interests and abilities ❑ I can use strategies for breaking long-term goals into short-term goals (that build toward the long-term goal) ❑ I can identify the skills and knowledge I need to work on to achieve my short-term goals

Skills Set G	Performance Indicators
Concentration/ Memory Skills	❑ I am able to focus on one task at a time, even though I may have many different tasks to do at once ❑ I can stick with a task or job until it's finished ❑ I use different techniques to help me concentrate better ❑ I use different strategies to improve my memory
Skills Set H	**Performance Indicators**
Thinking Skills	❑ I am usually able to think my way through things ❑ I can organize ideas and thoughts in my head ❑ I can use different approaches to deal with new information (e.g., outlining, reviewing, organizing, etc.) ❑ I can transfer knowledge from previous learning experiences to complete new tasks
Skills Set I	**Performance Indicators**
Understanding Personal Learning Style	❑ I can give examples of different learning styles ❑ I can describe the way I learn best ❑ I can find ways to deal with information that is not presented in my own learning style ❑ I can use strategies to deal with different types of learning materials (e.g., video, manuals, text books)
Skills Set J	**Performance Indicators**
Time-Management and Organization Skills	❑ I can manage my time well and get to class on time ❑ I complete assignments on time because I am organized ❑ I take care to organize my notes and binder ❑ I try to organize my work and assignments ahead of time - by the week, month or even a year
Skills Set K	**Performance Indicators**

Adaptability	❑ I adapt well to new situations
	❑ I can fit into a variety of situations
	❑ I can handle things when they take a different turn
	❑ I anticipate obstacles and am ready for them