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Jewell Shepard

Our Future: What our Learners Need and Want

Every adult learning center is continually changing, reflecting demographic changes in their community and state and federal mandates. OutFront is not just changing; it is closing. Effective June 30, 2007, The University of Saint Mary, our host institution, ceased its sponsorship of OutFront. OutFront was funded primarily through the AEFLA (Adult Education Family Literacy Act) grant and the City of Leavenworth block grant. The Leavenworth Sisters of Charity provided cash assistance as did the local Wal-Mart, Hallmark Corporation, Leavenworth County Human Service Council, and Fort Leavenworth Thrift Shop. However, since it was widely held in the community that the Sisters have enormous amounts of money, it was difficult for OutFront to fund raise on its own behalf. This problem was accentuated by a sharp decline in the number of participants in Fiscal Years 2006 and 2007, which led to a sharp decline in federal funding. The university was unable to compensate for the lack of federal funds.

The University of Saint Mary has hosted our program since its inception in 1985. This private Catholic university provided book-keeping, audit and payroll services, as well as assistance with copying large projects, marketing, and legal matters (such as the lease on the building). Because the university was struggling financially, it was unable to provide added cash supplements to the federal grant and local donations as other community colleges and unified school districts do with their adult learning centers.

News of the closing adversely affected the learners, staff, and community. In fact, there was an equal sense of despair among learners and teachers when OutFront announced it was closing. Since then, assurances have been made that there will be another host institution to sponsor a similar program, thus lessening the emotional impact. As of September 15, 2007, no one has been rehired for the new program. Yet, the former staff gets together on the phone or in person to share their distress about personal finances and concerns about the future of the learners that need help.

Jewel Shepard has been an adult educator since 1999 as an instructor and Director at the former University of Saint Mary Adult Education Center, OutFront. Presently, she is employed as Program Facilitator of Educational Services at the Corrections Corporation of America Leavenworth Detention Center, and privately tutors students in English.

Regardless of the institution that will host an adult education program in Leavenworth County, the learners have indicated that what is most important about their center is the instructors. Our adult learners indicate that changing the host institution or location will not affect them. The English as Second Language (ESL) learners were surveyed separately and asked the same questions as the Adult Basic Education (ABE) learners. If they were unable to write well enough in English to answer the questions, they responded verbally, and the instructor wrote down their responses. The ESL learners responded positively to the questions concerning instructors and hours. However, the ESL learners have strong feelings about the closure because they have been told there will not be a program to learn English after OutFront closes. One ESL learner wrote, "It makes me sad. I am disappointed. It will affect my learning English. It keeps me from getting a better job."

Leavenworth

Established when Kansas was still a territory, Leavenworth was the first city in Kansas, built next to Fort Leavenworth as a support community for soldiers and their families. Many old brick stables, homes, and businesses still stand. It occupies a hilly area of the state and defies the stereotype of Kansas being flat and uninteresting. Leavenworth is a fairly small community with an estimated 35,211 inhabitants in 2003. More than a quarter (27.7%) of its citizens are under 18 years of age. The town is located alongside the Missouri River in the northeast section of the state. The land area covers 24 square miles, with an average of 1,507 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

The racial composition of Leavenworth is 76.8% White, which is a slight decline since the U.S. 1990 Census when Leavenworth's population was 80.0% White. The percentage of African Americans has increased from 15.8% of the total population in 1990 to 16.3% in 2000. The number of Hispanics/Latinos has also increased during the same period from 4.7% to 5.1%. The remaining population includes American Indians, Asians, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). However, Leavenworth is more racially and culturally diverse than these statistics indicate. This is because Leavenworth is right across the street from Fort Leavenworth, which is home to the Command and General Staff College. Fort Leavenworth trains military officers from all over the world and houses their families. These families play an important role in the town's awareness of different countries, cultures, appearances, and food specialties. Such diversity provides multiple opportunities for its inhabitants to be aware and accepting of the many gender, racial, ethnic and cultural differences.

OutFront: History and Operation

OutFront—Leavenworth's only adult learning center—was founded by Kitty Bronec, who was (and still is) very involved with the local Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth. Initially classes were held downtown above a pharmacy and soda fountain store. Students were allowed to smoke inside, come and go at will, and study whatever they chose. The outcome measure then was to pass the General Educational Development (GED) tests, and there were few requirements to receive funding. Since then, the requirements for federal grants and state pressure to obtain measurable outcomes have become increasingly demanding, especially since the year 2000. Instructors often complain that the pressure to obtain "educational gains" (as

measured by the CASAS - Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System- tests) interferes with their productive teaching. They felt this pressure shifts the focus from meeting the demands of the learner to meeting the demands of government.

OutFront outgrew its original location in 1994 and moved to another location downtown that was more comfortable and had space for 20 to 30 students. It also had a large computer room and separate tutoring rooms. Although it was housed in a basement, the fronts of the office and the computer lab had windows that allowed natural light in so the area felt quite open and pleasant. It was located near the poorest part of town with the highest crime but was in walking distance for many students who lived in the neighborhood close to the downtown.

OutFront's student population reflected the racial and cultural diversity of Leavenworth and offered an opportunity for students to interact and collaborate. Social interactions occurred in the classroom between students from all over the world who were learning English and basic skills. Instructors held joint celebrations with ABE and ESL students where they learned about American culture and holidays and shared stories about their own cultures.

Interestingly, ESL learners from Fort Leavenworth were almost always from the upper socioeconomic class in their countries of origin and typically well-educated. These learners interacted with our ABE learners who almost always were from low income families with limited education. Often ABE students were younger than ESL students and looked "rough and tough", some with extreme facial piercing and tattoos. The results of this rich interaction were that all learners became more accepting of diversity and overcame negative stereotypes towards people who have different cultural values. For example, a 30 year-old Korean woman befriended a 17 year-old White male with severe family problems. She encouraged him to continue to attend classes and spoke with him often about the poverty in her country. He passed the GED test, and his attitude shifted from defiant to gentle. She in turn learned not to judge a teenager by his or her appearance.

All of our instructors had at least a Bachelor's degree as required by the Kansas Board of Regents. A third of the instructors over the past years also had Master's degrees and teaching certificates. All instructors were required to be members of the Kansas Adult Education Association and maintain their credentials by earning a certain number of continuing education points every two years. These points were earned through the Kansas Board of Regents training sessions, the Kansas Adult Education Association annual conference, self-study, staff meetings, and outside college or university courses.

In 2000, OutFront started requiring students to attend a three to four day orientation before attending classes. Individual study was slowly replaced by small group instruction directly targeted toward the student's lowest level, whether it was math, reading, or writing. The determinant of these small groups was the CASAS competencies which measure skills needed to work toward passing the GED, and is the basis of measurable outcomes in adult education in Kansas. Measurable outcomes became increasingly more difficult to obtain. Three years ago, educational gain was achieved when a student demonstrated certain technology or workplace skills as defined by the Kansas Board of Regents. Two years ago, those measures for educational gains were dropped, and the educational gains were counted by progressing a level through CASAS testing or by passing the GED. Other outcomes, such as obtaining or retaining employment, achiev-

ing citizenship skills, and entering postsecondary education, were also counted, but not in the percent of educational gains.

Obstacles and Solutions

We faced many issues and obstacles during the past two decades as society experienced a fast change. Some of the more pressing issues that we had to deal with regularly were:

1. Helping students catch up if their attendance was poor. Therefore, OutFront instituted a stricter attendance policy. If a learner missed class three times in a month, he or she was suspended until the beginning of the next class session. Class sessions were seven to eight weeks, depending on holidays.

2. Dealing with the maturity level of the 16 to 18 year olds learners in our ABE program. Teenage issues were dealt with on an individual basis keeping clear limits in mind. Some of the "drama" experienced at the center was related to the learners becoming emotionally and sexually involved with each other, and later breaking up. Instructors often played the role of a counselor and provided examples of adult coping methods. It must be mentioned that the ESL classes and evening ABE classes at OutFront did not have the same amount of "drama" since the students were older, more mature, and usually in more stable family relationships.

3. The success of the ABE learners depended upon the instructor's level of cultural competency and understanding, including knowing the culture of modern teenagers. Instructors had to be flexible and knowledgeable in relationship to cultural and racial differences so they could treat each learner equitably. The instructor needed to instill in each student that success was achievable .

4. Managing the classroom was a problem if groups were smaller than five or larger than ten. Having a Workplace Essential Skills (WES) and a technology instructor helped us manage class size. Students were scheduled to participate in the computer lab if one ABE or ESL group was too large.

Curriculum has changed dramatically since 2003. Prior to 2003, individual study was the primary course of learning. This was determined by the state not to be cost-effective. Since instituting more structured, small group classes, the percentage of educational gains increased, and the gains were more quickly achieved. For example, in Fiscal Year (FY) 2006, OutFront had 69% level completions, measured by CASAS diagnostics, compared to the state average of 63%. Also, in FY06, OutFront had 92% completion of those with the goal of obtaining a GED, whereas the state average was 69%. This differential might be attributed to the different demographics of our community and its relationship to Ft. Leavenworth.

Students' Voices

A survey was given to all adult learners in May 2007. The purpose of this survey was to determine what types of instruction and policies were effective in helping learners achieve their goals. We asked students six questions:

1. What has worked for you to help you learn at OutFront? Students' responses included positive remarks related to the instructors' teaching skills and small group atmosphere. Other responses included indicators that adult

learners need to have positive feeling—something they did not feel in traditional school settings. One learner wrote, “What has worked for me is that I am not as ashamed as I was because I understand that there are others that are like me who are trying to get educated and feel the same way I did.” Another learner answered, “The time and effort the teachers have made to help me learn.”

2. What is not working well for you at OutFront? The learners indicated that they wished they could attend longer hours. One learner wrote, “The only thing that does not work is the time the center opens. I wish that class would start at 7:30 or 8:00.” (OutFront opens at 8:30 a.m.). Another learner wrote that a problem is “...the short time. I would like to stay here longer.” (Classes run for three hours). Yet another learner stated that the seats were uncomfortable.

3. Why did you come to OutFront in the beginning? The primary reasons learners came to OutFront were either to learn English or to pass the GED. Almost 100% percent of ABE learners stated they needed to get a GED. Only about one percent of the students indicated a desire to simply increase their basic math, reading, or writing skills to obtain better employment.

4. What roadblocks did you face to attend OutFront? Roadblocks to learning were discussed during orientation and dealt with thereafter on a daily basis. Main roadblocks for the students were: transportation; sick children; husbands being deployed to the Iraq war; fear of not being able to learn because of age or past educational experiences; ability to wake up in the morning; transportation problems; psychiatric disorders; and family interference. Because transportation was the most common roadblock, we discussed with the groups sharing rides or getting transportation assistance from the Council on Aging, located next door to our center. Many students felt that our location helped with the problem by being centrally located and close to the northeast section of town where most of our learners lived.

5. What are your families' educational backgrounds? Only three of the 17 students indicated they had an immediate family member with a college degree. Two had family members with “some college”, and the remaining either had family members with high school diplomas or no degrees at all. Their families may give lip service to the importance of education, but their inability to overcome personal and educational roadblocks interfered with their ability to further their education. It was always exciting to attend graduation and see families applaud the first child in their family's history to ever receive a high school diploma.

6. How do you feel your instructors respond to your needs? Some students stated that the instructors responded very well to their needs and were very caring; that they would help students with anything and tell them what to do; and that they were attentive, concerned about the students' well-being, and offered much encouragement. It is imperative that instructors interact well with the learners.

Suggestions for a Successful Adult Basic Education Center

Adult basic education in the future needs to continue providing small, structured group instruction and to ensure individual study opportunities for those whose attendance is interrupted by family problems. This is not an easy task for centers or instructors because the pressure to achieve certain percentages of educational gains wears on instructors. One instructor this year said, “I feel like a used car salesman. If I don't sell enough cars or get enough educational gains, even if the student didn't attend long enough, I'm in trouble.” Kansas has historically had such high achievement in percentages of level completions and GEDs, it is difficult to maintain the required educational gains.

With public school districts doing more to keep students in traditional high school, adult education needs to reach out more to adults over 18 years to encourage them to complete the GED in order to become more employable. Funds for advertising, such as radio and television public announcements, are needed to reach this population. Flyers in libraries or churches do not reach most people in need of completing high school. Employers need to support their entry level staff to attend class or even provide room to have classes held at their facilities for students who don't speak adequate English or who need to complete the GED.

In some areas in Kansas, adult education enrollments are declining, as they were at OutFront since 2005. Yet, the programs offered by adult learning centers are still greatly needed by those who don't succeed elsewhere. One student summed it up by stating, “No one else ever cared about me. I never thought I could get my GED, but I have. My teacher didn't care about me being 'weird' and took the time to help me.”

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